

# Chapter III

## (Post-)Independent Women – Romance, Return, and Pan-African Feminism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

“Since I must not all the same allow you to look at the future through rose coloured glasses, you should know that what is arising, what one has not yet seen to its final consequences [...] is racism, about which you have yet to hear the last word. Voilà!”

Jacques Lacan

“The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative.”

Peter Brooks

### 1 Introduction: Not That Kind of #BlackGirlMagic?

What presents itself as a subtle balancing act in *Open City* emerges more formally and overtly in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s best-selling novel *Americanah* (2013). Here, the ability or desire to voice the different ways in which members of the Black Diaspora view “history through skin color” (Forna) extends well beyond the novel’s themes and also manifests itself in the manner in which the novel appears to straddle two ostensibly opposed genres at once, rendering it a soothingly utopian romance that also aspires to “gritty,” real-life realism. *Americanah* spans three continents and is set at various locations in Nigeria, England, and the US. It follows the lives of high school sweethearts Ifemelu and Obinze, who, unsatisfied with the dismal situation under Nigerian military rule, make their way to the American East Coast and London, respectively. After undergoing quite different immigrant experiences, both eventually return to Lagos. Told predominantly from the perspective of Ifemelu, who has only recently made the decision to return and nurtures the hope of reuniting with the now estranged Obinze, most of the novel’s seven parts are told in flashbacks that trace her initial difficulties and then steady success in the US. Inserted into the otherwise plot-driven and decidedly romantic narrative are several short passages that tackle the subject of US-American racism from the perspective of an African immigrant and are taken from Ifemelu’s successful blog *Raceteenth – or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*.

This chapter argues that Adichie’s novel is highly conscious of how these different positionalities may be pitted against each other and that its depictions of uneasy intradiasporic encounters in deeply racist US-America are ultimately offset by its Pan-African aspirations. While most commentators have read *Americanah* as a contemporary realist novel, it also historicizes several impactful periods, such as a post-independence Nigeria under military rule, the postcolonial melancholia of pre-Brexit Britain, and, crucially, Barack Obama’s election in the US. The novel paints the Afropolitan moment as precisely this split or potential turn, and it does so by deftly handling temporal devices such as memory, foreshadowing, and the nostalgic yet future-oriented thrust of romance, while reflecting on the multitemporality and historicity of race and racialization. Likewise, I would argue that much of the novel’s ambivalence – and its success – lies in the way that it aims to be both gritty and real, and fancifully romantic. Couching realism in romance allows the novel to signify doubly, as in contradictorily, and to signify both, as in the ‘absent-presence’ or ‘not yet’ of utopia.

The novel’s peculiar, double-faced nature also crucially affects the level of reception, as it effectively addresses particularly broad yet differently positioned audiences. By far the most popular novel discussed in this study, the key to its success may lie in its ability to signify strongly – if multiply.<sup>62</sup> Like any text, the novel does not allow unequivocal readings, even though it offers the right amount of accessibility for readers to engage easily, and the right amount of ambiguity to address many. While inseparably linked, these attributes may equally benefit its author, who has developed an almost brand-like persona in public discourse. Prior to *Americanah*’s publication, Adichie had already received numerous accolades with her novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), as well as regularly publishing short stories in publications such as *Granta* or the *New York Times Magazine*, many of which were collected in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). Following the publication of *Americanah*, and ever since Beyoncé sampled parts of Adichie’s TED Talk *We Should All Be Feminists* on her eponymous album later that year, Adichie morphed from popular writer to pop icon.

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<sup>62</sup> The website [chimamanda.com](http://chimamanda.com) notes that the novel has been licensed for publication in 29 languages. It has won the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and *The Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize for Fiction of the same year, was named an NPR “Great reads” Book, a *Washington Post* Notable Book, a *Seattle Times* Best Book, an *Entertainment Weekly* Top Fiction Book, a *Newsday* Top 10 Book, and a Goodreads Best of the Year pick. It was also listed among the *New York Times Book Review*’s “Ten Best Books of 2013” and won the “One Book, One New York” campaign in 2017. Its film rights were acquired in 2014 by Brad Pitt’s production company Plan B, and the production is said to star David Oyelowo and Lupita Nyong’o.

Today, it seems as though she has organically grown into the role of the world-famous writer of whom many people might have heard (even if they have never read her), who is both asked to comment on international politics and lauded for her fashion sense, and whose whimsically illustrated quotes circulate the web in meme-like manner. Yet, without discrediting any of her literary and/or cultural achievements, there is certainly more to her fast ascent and fame than mere merits. Many, if not all of these commentaries and quotes relate to issues of race and gender, and this also reveals the discursive realm in which both her status as literary writer and her role as a public intellectual most strongly overlap.

It is probably safe to say that, particularly among a younger demographic, Adichie is the most popular African writer living today. And this is probably not due to the fact that she is repeatedly dubbed as Chinua Achebe's heir, but because she is actually *not* like him, that she embodies a new, female, and glamorous generation of African writers apart from eminent forefathers like Soyinka, Achebe, Ngũgĩ, or Farrah. In a way, Adichie is the poster child of the agency and autonomy associated with both Afropolitanism and what some call either third-wave pop-feminism or neoliberal post-feminism; she is the perfect (post-)independent woman writer. While, as Sisonke Msimang writes in "All Your Faves are Problematic," Adichie occupied "a unique place in contemporary black women's thought and literature for at least a decade before the phrase black girl magic was coined as a hashtag," her rise to celebrity cannot be tethered from an era in which this hashtag has become "the motto for a new generation's struggle for recognition and self-love" (2017: para. 6).

As a popular representation of #BlackGirlMagic, Adichie has become a spokesperson for a range of contemporary feminist issues, along with the potential pitfalls that accompany such discourses. When Adichie attracted heavy criticism for her comments on trans women, Msimang wrote a takedown not necessarily of her, but of what she called the "trap of #blackgirlmagic." For the purpose of my argument, articles like "All Your Faves are Problematic" are less instructive on the specific dynamics of fan idealization or call-out-culture but indeed reveal how much Adichie has become not only a global or African, but a specifically Black feminist icon. As Msimang writes:

Adichie is African of course, but because she began writing in a world that was more global than it had ever been, because she traveled so frequently between Nigeria and America, she was easily claimed as a member of a much larger global African diaspora. She may technically belong to two countries, but she is collectively seen as a daughter or a sister to Black people in a broader sense. (2017: para. 7)

Yet Adichie was able to simultaneously signify something entirely different, too, allowing for multiple projections, as all highly visible figures do. While, on the one hand, Adichie's achievements were tagged with #BlackGirlMagic and her novels filed under "Black Woman Writers" reading lists, she was also able to signify as not Black, or at least as not *that* Black, and as disassociated from Blackness.<sup>63</sup> How was she able to signify both? For one, Adichie's coming to fame in the moment of Afropolitanism is marked by this moment's ambiguity, signaling both an alleged post-racialism and an intense re-signification of political Blackness. As such, the novel must be placed within a literary context that functions "as a space to explore the contradictions and paradoxes of race in a putatively 'post-racial' age" (Schur 2013: 252).

On the other hand, Adichie's novel demonstrates what Goyal calls "a new discourse about race being conducted in African novels" – yet an additional or supplementary one, rather than one that advances a usurping or disassociated kind of Blackness (Goyal 2014: xvii). Placing this discourse "alongside the frame of the black Atlantic" rather than above it means being attentive to the manner Adichie conducts her investigations of intradiasporic difference or intra-racial divides in *Americanah*. It means asking for a level of nuance that is usually not employed by post-racial pundits or those inclined to stress diasporic rifts, fissures, or an Afropolitan divestment of Blackness.

With her protagonist Ifemelu, Adichie shares the often-quoted narrative of becoming Black in America, of not considering herself Black in her home country Nigeria and 'not getting' the concept of race. Yet if one views the novel through the lens of its popular reception, particularly in respect to how the author and protagonist tend to be conflated, that narrative is surprisingly often truncated in editorials on *Americanah* and interviews with the author, rendering it a static truism rather than the dynamic process Adichie goes on to describe. While Adichie in fact historicizes and 'provincializes' a hegemonic, Euro-Atlantic notion of Blackness, many commentators ignore the latter part of the narrative and somewhat eagerly latch onto the notion of Adichie simply rejecting an over-blown American race discourse.

In one of her earliest non-fiction texts on race in the US, a *Washington Times* opinion piece from 2008, Adichie describes her unease at being called "sister" in

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<sup>63</sup> The German weekly *Die Zeit* and a public radio feature, *radioWissen* on BR2, titled "Ich bin nicht schwarz!" for its discussion of *Americanah*; an interview on *Salon.com* had the quote "Race doesn't occur to me" as its title. The German *Frankfurter Allgemeine* went as far as deeming the novel a "caesura" that finally voiced how even minorities themselves are weary of anti-discrimination discourses and political correctness. See Mangold 2014; Bayerischer Rundfunk 2019; Bady 2013; Spiegel 2014.

a Brooklyn store. Having recently come from Nigeria, a country that may have been colonized, but, as Adichie quips, thanks to its mosquitos never experienced the racial hierarchy of a settler colony, race had remained an “exotic abstraction” to her, something of a fiction: “It was Kunta Kinte,” Adichie writes, followed by the candid reflection: “To be called ‘sister’ was to be black, and blackness was the very bottom of America’s pecking order. I did not want to be black” (2008: para. 2). She then goes on to recount an almost Fanonian moment of being interpellated by a little white boy: “‘She’s black,’ he said to his mother and stared silently at me before going back upstairs. I laughed stupidly, perhaps to deflate the tension, but I was angry” (Adichie 2008: para. 3). Following this personal exposition, Adichie snidely dissects the different deflecting attitudes toward racism that represent “how mainstream America talks about blackness” (para. 5).

However, in the same way that Adichie’s narrative of ‘coming to America’ goes beyond the mere bewilderment at an obtusely coded racial discourse or the ‘foreignness’ of race as outdated ideology, so does *Americanah* reflect a much more complex coming to terms with, rejecting, and embracing of different notions of Blackness. Like Ifemelu, Adichie has eventually *learned* to be Black. This ‘learning of Blackness,’ however, is represented quite differently in the novel. For one, it is book knowledge, such as Ifemelu devouring *The Fire This Time* and then “every James Baldwin title on the shelf” (*Americanah* 135). At other times, it is lived, and actually quite intensely felt experience, angering or frustrating Ifemelu in a similar way to Adichie’s memory of the little boy – a truly primal scene. In a 2013 interview, Adichie expands on how, eventually, her “resentment turned to acceptance”:

I read a lot of African American history. And if I had to choose a group of people whose collective story I most admire today, then it would be African Americans. The resilience and grace that many African Americans brought to a brutal and dehumanizing history is very moving to me. Sometimes race enrages me, sometimes it amuses me, sometimes it puzzles me. I’m now happily black and now don’t mind being called a sister, but I do think that there are many ways of being black. (Segal 2013: para. 25)

In *Americanah*, the journey from rejection to nuanced celebration of Black consciousness is spurred by a certain diasporic desire, a Pan-African subtext marked by varying degrees of over- and dis-identification. Generally, while *Americanah* offers plenty of scenes that illustrate the irritating and harmful effects of racism in a majority-white society, there are just as many that highlight the uneasy negotiations between diasporic identities of old and new, where racial solidarity and imagined community are measured with the finely calibrated scales of class and gender. Ifemelu feels hurt when she is accused of not feeling “the

stuff she’s writing about,” and she senses disdain toward her “Africanness,” apparently rendering her “not sufficiently furious” (345). And, when confronted with the earnest zeal of her Black American partner Blaine, she drifts toward a francophone African scholar named Boubacar, with whom she shares a playful condescension for American culture, while sensing Blaine’s resentment at “this mutuality, something primally African from which he felt excluded” (340). However, as a self-identified Non-American Black, Ifemelu does employ Blackness as grounds for solidarity, even though she eschews both the somewhat outdated Pan-African scripts of old and the linear spatiotemporal trajectory of a Middle Passage that eclipses Africa.

Instead, the novel develops the notion of denaturalized, historically contingent Black identities – in Ifemelu’s case an African *and* Black identity – that are more akin to Stuart Hall’s notion of cultural identity as a “matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’” In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall famously stresses the necessary historicity of cultural identities while drawing attention to the way they are articulated and developed apropos historical constellations (1994: 394). This dynamic process is performed both by Adichie and *Americanah*, but because it is mediated differently, it is also important to distinguish the levels and modes through which this “continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” is articulated in the historical constellation of Afropolitanism (Hall 1994: 394).

## 2 “You Can’t Write an Honest Novel About Race in This Country”: Reading for Race

Both in terms of style and content, the *Washington Times* opinion piece resembles Ifemelu’s successful race blog in *Americanah*. Here, Ifemelu satirizes her initiation into America’s racial order in a blog post titled “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You Are Black, Baby” (220). She recounts her bewilderment at an almost indecipherable code – where being asked whether one likes watermelon becomes a covert insult – while admitting to the difficulties of either representing race for Black Americans or talking about race with white liberals or white conservatives. “If possible, make it funny,” she advises the reader (221). This tongue-in-cheek pitch of Ifemelu’s witty blog posts, her equal puzzlement at the notion of offensiveness, liberal sensitivities, and conservative aggression, is perhaps what commentators have often lauded as being so “refreshing,” “eye opening,” and “non-didactic” about the novel – as if *Americanah* were in fact a humorous blog or a sociological study on race relations in the US. Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek’s interpretation of *Americanah*, “A Complex

Weave,” draws much of its critical content from reading the blog as performed authorship. The authors posit that both Adichie’s and the character Ifemelu’s “pose and prose” can be identified as characteristic of “an Afropolitan demeanour [...] that takes a point of departure in the human rather than the ideological aspects of the twenty-first-century African experience in the diaspora” (Knudsen and Rahbeck 2016: 240). This leap of first conflating author and protagonist and then deducting the ontological status of Afropolitanism from these authors’ textual engagements is meant to stress the political and potentially radical purport of digital Afropolitanism. Their claim is that, while Adichie’s novel is inherently political (the authors point out the political dimensions of its major themes hair and love), the novel’s blog is explicitly so, and thus merely a smaller, fictionalized version of Adichie’s self-avowed desire to write a “gritty, taken-from-real-life book [...] about race” (Mesure 2013: para. 10).

It is surely a delicate act to read *Americanah* through this lens without reducing it to the ‘race novel’ as which it has been hailed. Indeed, more so than her earlier novels, *Americanah* partakes in a global conversation on race and the African signifier. In terms of geographical scope, there is an obvious shift from her decidedly national fiction to this transnational novel, even though her short stories and her earlier novels set in Nigeria already signify the Black Diaspora.<sup>64</sup> Thinking through both the significance and the limitations of reading *Americanah* through race, Goyal writes: “[N]ovels like *Americanah* are often held to a different standard and required to be ethnography or a sign of resistance, and aesthetic questions are too easily suppressed in favor of expected modes of reading through a rather simple political lens” (2014: xvii). Generally, although race and diaspora are predominant topoi in *Americanah*, we cannot for example read the blog as sociological testimony to this. This is what Goyal suggests when she notes that, in order to “assess the novel’s realism as a craft, and not simply a given,” it is imperative to distinguish “between the claims of the race blog and those of the narrative itself” (2014: xiii). There is a certain compulsory bluntness, as well as a generic limitation to the blog that the novel both utilizes and navigates.

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<sup>64</sup> Despite being repeatedly described as a literary ‘heir’ to Chinua Achebe and the more national focus of her previous novels, links between the US and Nigeria have certainly played a role in Adichie’s writing, most markedly in the immigrant’s perspectives of her short story collection, but also through migratory characters such as Auntie Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus*, or via the Pan-Africanism of Odenigbo in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Here, tentative links are also established between the freedom dreams and nationalist plight of Biafra and the Birmingham bombing in US America’s segregated South. For a discussion of Adichie’s rewriting of and positioning toward Achebe, see Eisenberg 2013: 8–24.

The blog posts are inserted at various points in the narrative, sometimes complementing the action, at other times appearing more random. They are set apart from the main narrative not only typographically, but also in terms of style, embodying the “*irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking voice*” her readers have praised. While the function of the race blog’s accompanying and oftentimes commenting on her life could perhaps be compared to that of a choir, the blog is also theatrical in another sense. There is an unequivocal element of performativity to the blog posts, with their frequent use of *ad spectatores*, rhetorical questions, and an acute awareness of the audience, that culminates in Ifemelu’s feelings of paranoid stage fright and nakedness, of identity layers peeling away. The blog’s most vocal critic is surely Blaine, who accuses it of lacking depth and political zeal (345). But already with the opening chapter, the reader is told how Ifemelu herself is unsatisfied with the way her celebrated race blog has developed. At this point, she has already sold it and remembers how, anxious to impress her ever-growing readership, she had “began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people’s stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself. The more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false” (5).

Where the blog only feigns self-assuredness, the novel’s tone is notably poised and confident in its straight-forward realism, displaying an emphatically clear style, an impression heightened by the fact that the main protagonists Ifemelu and Obinze repeatedly fret about misinterpreted, one-sided, or otherwise warped communication, particularly via technology. While mulling over a love interest’s email or text message certainly makes for a good romantic plot device, this kind of exploration of the limits and levels of written communication is noteworthy in a novel whose prose, according to the author, aspires to Orwell’s dictum of being “like a windowpane” and whose main protagonist and author hold a degree in communications (Smith 2014: 00:14:54).

I would argue that Ifemelu’s self-conscious doubts concerning the performativity of the race blog are negotiated through recourse to other, ostensibly more ‘authentic’ or meaningful literary genres. The various notions of literariness exercised in *Americanah* are striking, as pronounced distinctions are made in respect to newer communicative forms such as the blog post, the email, the text message and the either more enduring or simply more personal reading experience of novels and poetry. An example of this self-reflective meditation on authenticity, literary genre, and form is the scene of Ifemelu and Blaine’s initial encounter. Having only just decided “to stop faking an American accent” (173), Ifemelu feels confident and “truly” like herself when she meets the handsome African American Yale professor on a short train ride to Massachusetts. They in-

stantly lapse into a mild flirtation, with Ifemelu holding forth, somewhat flip-pantly, about academese-speaking academics “who don’t really know what’s happening in the real world” and Blaine replying: “That’s a pretty strong opinion.” “I don’t know how to have any other kind”, Ifemelu retorts (179). During their brief encounter, she also experiences a bout of self-consciousness when she watches him reading a hardcover and the *New York Times*, while she is reading a glossy women’s magazine. Suddenly, she feels the “unreasonable urge to tell him how much she loved the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa” (178).

Although the novel offers much critique of the kind of intellectual sparring and cultural cachet that attaches itself to some texts and not others, poetry does play a significant role in Ifemelu’s coming of age narrative. While the course of the narrative suggests that Ifemelu is also evolving as a writer, the final incarnation of her blog garners the highest praise when someone, possibly Obinze, comments that a blog post reads “*like poetry*” (474). Apropos the deliberate forthrightness of the blog, the bluntness of strong opinions, and the ostensive immediacy and authenticity of realist prose, *Americanah*, it seems, also advocates for the circumspectness of poetry. The poet Komunyakaa himself has commented on the necessary indirectness of his work: “Poetry is a kind of distilled insinuation. It’s a way of expanding and talking around an idea or a question. Sometimes, more actually gets said through such a technique than a full-frontal assault” (2000: 135). Like Ifemelu reading a women’s magazine while actually thinking about and eventually writing like poetry, the novel also somewhat defiantly adopts the libidinal economy and glossy surface of romantic genre fiction while suggesting that there is some kind of ‘real’ poetic truth beneath the surface.

Accordingly, I would also argue that *Americanah*’s most profound meditations on race do not occur through the bluntness of the blog, but through the medium of genre. Or, more accurately, the key to understanding the novel’s treatment of the Black Diaspora lies in the way these themes are embedded in, or strategically deployed through, genre. In this approach, I follow Goyal’s reminder that to “assume that genre is not pertinent to the study of race is to suppose that the minority text exists as itself, without institutional identity or pressures” (2010: 11). As such, it is important to contextualize the vexed question of authenticity and the dialectic relation to literary realism for African as well as African American fiction. One need only recall Jameson’s national allegory argument, according to which the third world text necessarily expresses “daily reality” because, even if it assumes genres distinct from “traditional realism,” it “must be situational and materialist despite itself” (1986: 85–86). As Gikandi notes, “Adichie is certainly engaged in the production of the realistic cultural narrative, but at the same time she wants to do this without necessarily confirming our de-

sire for a certain kind of Africa” (2016: 56). In the historical context of African American fiction, as scholar Gene Andrew Jarret notes, the relation between race and authenticity has often been negotiated via the genre of “racial realism,” a term that, he writes,

pertains to a long history in which authors have sought to re-create a lived or living world according to prevailing ideologies of race or racial difference. Intellectuals in the past seldom used the term to describe African American literature, though [...] Alain Locke came closest in 1928, when he called ‘modernist’ black authors ‘race-realists.’ Rather, they employed other words to measure the degree to which literary representations of the race gravitated toward public expectations of realism. The words included ‘real,’ ‘true,’ ‘authentic,’ ‘objective,’ ‘bona-fide,’ ‘genuine,’ ‘original,’ ‘creative,’ ‘curious,’ ‘novel,’ ‘spontaneous,’ and ‘vigorous.’ (Jarrett 2011: 8)

Notably, rather than employing a modernist or postmodernist aesthetic, or modes of estrangement that foreground its literary rather than its documentary purport, *Americanah* displays a pronounced skepticism toward these kinds of literatures, or, more accurately, toward the people excessively valuing such forms over all others. Upon meeting a journalist and former English major at a party, Obinze notes with regret that, for him, “a book did not qualify as literature unless it had polysyllabic words and incomprehensible passages” (31). Ifemelu, reflecting on her failed relationship with Blaine, notes his predilection for “novels written by young and youngish men and packed with *things*, a fascinating, confounding accumulation of brands and music and comic books and icons, with emotions skimmed over, and each sentence stylishly aware of its own stylishness” (12). Neither skimming emotions nor dumbfounding readers with opaque prose, *Americanah* appears to embody its own gold standard. Yet despite its confident narrative poise, the novel expresses an ambiguity toward its realist status, self-consciously foregrounding “its own reception as a new kind of black novel,” as well as expounding the difficulties in writing about race (Goyal 2014: xiv). As Blaine’s sister Shan notes:

If you write about how people are really affected by race, it’ll be too *obvious* [...]. So if you’re going to write about race, you have to make sure it’s so lyrical and subtle that the reader who doesn’t read between the lines won’t even know it’s about race. You know, a Proustian meditation, all watery and fuzzy, that at the end just leaves you feeling watery and fuzzy. (335–336)

Squared with the novel’s critique of the blog, this statement appears to be arguing for a somewhat circumspect nuance and a direct simplicity that need not complicate or obscure race. This ambiguity may also be discernible through its recourse to other, notably gendered and less obviously racialized genres such

as ‘chick lit’ or romantic genre fiction. Indeed, the novel may wittingly announce its own, inevitable failure through the character of Shan: “You can’t write an honest novel about race in this country” (335). At the same time, rather than fully accepting this defeat, the novel’s accentuated realism leaves just enough room for believing that it might be up for the challenge, that it may indeed be that “honest” and authentic representation of American race relations. Perhaps, this openness may also account for its particularly wide appeal. As Gikandi argues, “part of the realism of her works emerges from the assumption that she is just presenting people as they are. *Americanah* has great moments of ordinariness, but there are also moments where it seems to want to be going out of its way to attract a certain kind of readership” (2016: 59). Without suggesting that the different generic forms structuring *Americanah* can be neatly separated and mapped, the following sections explore when and to what effect the novel employs realism or romance, and what the stakes may be in prioritizing one over the other.

### 3 “True from Experience”: Reception and the Realness of Racialization

Writing about the 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist novel in *The Bourgeois*, Franco Moretti argues that “description *as a form* was not neutral at all: its effect was to inscribe the present so deeply in the past that alternatives became simply unimaginable” (93). One could argue that *Americanah* employs realism in an effort to document the facticity and pervasiveness of race in/as history and counters its grip by resorting to romantic flights of fancy. Yet this neat binary would obscure the novel’s self-aware acknowledgment that realism, like reality or history, is far from neutral but always preordains a certain viewpoint or positionality. Clearly, serious tensions arise when this kind of relativism rubs against the hard realities of racism. That this is a central concern for the novel can be seen in two distinct scenes, one set in supposedly Cool Britannia, the other in the US at the cusp of the Obama era.

Shortly before he will be deported, *Americanah*’s second protagonist Obinze experiences a moment of racial splitting, or double consciousness, that interpellates him as an index of the causal course of history and, at the same time, conscripts him into the ontological timelessness of the racialized, eternal ‘other.’ On a train to Essex, Obinze finds himself travelling in, but not part of, a group of Nigerians. All of a sudden and only “for a moment,” he perceives the “unfettered non-white foreignness of this scene through the suspicious eyes of the white woman on the tube” (259).

As an instance of racialization, this scene recalls the often-quoted passage in Fanon’s “The Fact of Blackness,” where he discovers his “blackness, [his] ethnic characteristics” and “above all *historicity*,” becoming “responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors [...]. [B]attered down by tomtoms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (2008: 84–85). As Bhabha describes it in *The Location of Culture*, Fanon’s phenomenological performance illustrates what it means: “To be amongst those whose very presence is both ‘overlooked’ – in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal – and, at the same time, overdetermined – psychically projected, made stereotypical and symptomatic” (2004: 339). Obinze’s realization in *Americanah* is ominously contextualized with a reflection on how a xenophobic headline in the woman’s evening newspaper is “echoed” not only by so many others like it, but also by “the radio and television, even the chatter of some of the men in the warehouse”:

The wind blowing across the British Isles was odorous with fear of asylum seekers [...], as though the writers lived *in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past*, and they had never considered this to be the normal course of history: the influx into Britain of black and brown people from countries created by Britain. (258–259, emphasis added)

Seeing himself through the eyes of a woman who most likely perceives him as a threat, Obinze becomes a marker of “non-white foreignness,” his identity reduced to both a group and a historical moment that are, curiously so, overdetermined by history and at the same time not historicized at all. Obinze knows that the influx of Black and brown people, if not even the very existence of these racialized others, is a historical fact made by Britain. Yet what appears to be a simple fact of history, indeed its “normal course,” is a disruptive anomaly to those who seem to live “in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past.” As Gilroy writes in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (also published as *After Empire*):

The immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there; that basic fact of global history is not usually deniable. And yet its grudging recognition provides a stimulus for forms of hostility rooted in the associated realization that today’s unwanted settlers carry all the ambivalence of empire with them. [...] Indeed, the incomers may be unwanted and feared precisely because they are the unwitting bearers of the imperial and colonial past. (2005: 100)

This strange coupling of known unknowns, of conscious disavowal, or active forgetting, is not easily parsed. Yet it speaks to exactly the temporal conscription that Obinze experiences, who is an “unwitting bearer” of both too much and

not enough history. For Gilroy, that sense of historical disruption rather than continuity, and the manner in which this is connected to the immigrant body, bespeaks Britain's "inability to disentangle the disruptive results supposedly produced by an immigrant presence from the residual but potent effects of lingering but usually unspoken colonial relationships and imperial fantasies (Gilroy 2005: 100). Attached instead to a fantasy of lost imperial greatness, expressed by postcolonial melancholia, Britain is unable to connect the causal effects of this complicated past to the present moment. Rather than work through the complexities and ambiguities of Britain's colonial past, as Gilroy notes, "that unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten" (2005: 90).

This scene also conveys that there are two incompatible metahistorical views on Britain's present and that Obinze is able to glimpse both by seeing himself through the eyes of the white woman – a classic example of double consciousness. The notion of fundamentally different, yet parallel historical timelines – one a liberal notion of history as progress that may also entail an active forgetting, the other a more pessimist notion of deadlock or constant return – is also encapsulated in the novel's rendering of the Obama election. Here, the novel's particular use of realism also comes to the fore. In a 2017 article, scholar Alexander Manshel invokes the genre of the "recent historical novel," describing it as a "literary phenomenon invested in the very near-term process of making historical memory" (2017: 1). Among the most conventional historical events recently fictionalized, he lists "9/11 and its aftermath, [...] the 2008 financial crisis [...], and even the early career, election, and inauguration of Barack Obama," citing *Americanah* as an example for the latter (*ibid.*). One distinct feature of the recent historical novel, according to Manshel, is its preoccupation with contemporary "news and its narrative" not merely as "mediating experience" but as actually "*constituting* experience entirely" (2017: 6). In contrast, albeit clearly indebted to literary postmodernism's concerns with mediation, these novels express neither "jest" nor "bemusement," but rather a "deep uncertainty about the limits of historical experience in the context of contemporary media saturation" (*ibid.*).

*Americanah* does reflect on contemporaneous news and media cycles in the context of Obama's election campaign. Here, it becomes particularly interesting how the novel relates its most prevalent example of mediality, its formal and thematic engagement with the blogosphere of the late 2000s, to the news coverage of more established, mainstream media. Analogous to her relationship with African American Yale professor Blaine, the protagonist Ifemelu's excitement over the post-racial promise of Obama's presidency eventually sours. His election is depicted as a highly mediated and communal event: MSNBC's live coverage in-

terspersed with comments of Blaine’s friends and a text message from Ifemelu’s Cousin Dike: “*I can’t believe it. My President is black like me*” (360). At this particular point in time, Ifemelu’s romance with America and Blaine appears intact – we are told that “there was, at this moment, nothing that was more beautiful to her than America” (361). Yet her disenchantment with both is already anticipated when, leading up to the election, Ifemelu scours the internet “seeking information and reassurance” and inevitably finds the blunt racism of the chat rooms. The crude and violent comments on Obama, written “under monikers like *SuburbanMom231* and *NormanRockwellRocks*” (354), upset Ifemelu to the point of tears and make her successful race blog “feel inconsequential, a comedy of manners, a mild satire about a world that was anything but mild” (354).

The parallel media world of the chat rooms entirely undermines the surface glamour of, for example, MSNBC’s official news coverage, its “searing, sparkling liberal rage” (360), thus conveying another, uglier and ostensibly more realistic image of America.<sup>65</sup> In its representation of the mediation of Obama’s election, the novel aspires to impart something of a realist truth about the US that differs from the “ironic nothingness” its characters find in “contemporary American fiction” (256). As Manshel distinguishes the recent historical novel’s relation to postmodern fiction, “mediation here smacks less of simulacrum than of a particularly contemporary form of realism” (2017: 6).

In the context of the narrative, Obama’s election, a symbol of hope and liberal progress not merely for the US but for a wider global and diasporic imaginary, becomes the lifeline for a relationship that is destined to fail. Thus, while Manshel cites “the narrative satisfaction of historical telos” (2017: 11) as a key feature of the recent historical novel, *Americanah* also employs the melancholic historicism tethered to Obama’s presidency – the realization that it does not symbolize progress but stagnation and constant return. Here, realism really pertains to the realness of racism, as a true representation of a messy status quo too easily overlooked, glossed over, or disavowed.

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<sup>65</sup> Indeed, as an analysis of FBI hate crime statistics by *The Washington Post* shows: “There was a 21 percent increase in reported hate crimes the day after Barack Obama won his first election in 2008 (Williams 2018: para. 3). In his prior work as a lead analyst for homeland security, Daryl Johnson reported an almost instantaneous popularity spike for right wing movements during Obama’s campaign and especially after he was elected (the website *Stormfront* had five times more traffic on election night). These findings are testament to the political backlash *Americanah* indicates in this scene, leading to more overt racism, such as the formation of the Tea Party movement that incidentally also spin-doctored Johnson’s initial report and led to the disbanding and defunding of Johnson’s homeland security team by substituting the term “right wing extremism” with “violent extremism” (Johnson 2012).

How does this connect to the novel's reception? In a widely cited *New York Magazine* review, Kathryn Schulz credits the novel's appeal to how, rather than serving as an "exotic" window into Nigeria or the immigrant experience, it "endotically" reflects back cultural idiosyncrasies to US-American readers (2013: para. 8). That being said, the novel clearly 'does' different things for differently positioned audiences. When Ifemelu tells her effusively sensitive white employer Kimberly, "You know, you can just say 'black.' Not every black person is beautiful," this frankness is described as "the moment they became, truly, friends" (*Americanah* 147). One wonders how much of the mainstream appeal of the novel relied on the perceived taboo breach of bluntly looking at US race relations from the perspective of a purportedly removed yet participating observer: A Non-American Black who doesn't take racism quite so personally. Or, as one character notes about Ifemelu: "She's writing from the outside. She doesn't feel all the stuff she's writing about" (336).

Another poignant example of the novel's self-conscious exploration of parallel worldviews is the scene of the dinner party that Ifemelu attends with Blaine, where she accuses another guest, a stylish Haitian poet, of merely professing colorblindness in order "to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable" (291). A little drunk, feeling "overpowered" by words tumbling out of her mouth, Ifemelu exposes the "lie that race is not an issue," sharing what she knows to be "true [...] from experience." The other dinner guests, of whom an aging white man had just confessed his belief that "Obama will end racism" in the US, appear to be strangely fascinated by Ifemelu's candor. Sensing the kind of contained taboo break that makes for unforgettable dinner parties, they keep "their eyes on Ifemelu as though she was about to give up a salacious secret that would both titillate and implicate them" (291). That this level of reception is already folded back into the narrative seems to speak to the fact that *Americanah* indeed is this carefully crafted genre picture of contemporary American society, and that Adichie is well aware of the potential effects its content may have on certain readerships. I would argue that the novel provides an informed glimpse into these parallel worldviews but also allows itself to be received as "a mild satire about a world that was anything but mild." It is able to hold a slightly satirical mirror to differently positioned audiences without seriously offending any one of them, while also offering somewhat cathartic moments that purportedly cut through the charade.

In this sense, the novel's performative labor of 'giving voice to' or 'unveiling' uncomfortable truths relays another function of its (race) realism. For example, in "The Strange Familiar: Structure, Infrastructure, and Adichie's *Americanah*," Caroline Levine focuses on the defamiliarizingly realist descriptions of structural racism and infrastructural electricity, showing how the novel utilizes "long-

standing realist traditions” in order to render strange or noteworthy what is commonly taken for granted or disavowed (2015: 588). Here, she follows an understanding of realism as not only reaffirming and reifying (predominantly of bourgeois social structures), but as also potentially startling and alienating. She writes: “Does description confirm the old or introduce the new? At its best, I will argue, it does both: it asks us to perceive anew what we thought we already knew but did not perceive well enough” (Levine 2015: 589).

In order to analyze the intricate layering and complex relations of social structures and their straightforward and familiar ubiquity, Levine advocates “a descriptive and defamiliarizing alertness” and finds this in *Americanah*’s prose, its avowed dedication to render concrete and authentic what it sees elsewhere obscured. Certainly, the novel seems to foreground its opposition to obscurity – be it the opaqueness of academic jargon, the linguistic acrobatics of highbrow literature, religious bigotry, political correctness, or the moral bankruptcy of the postcolonial state – in the form of its outspoken and plainspoken protagonist Ifemelu.

Yet while conscious of the way privilege makes certain structures “easy to naturalize or take for granted to those who are benefiting from them” (2015: 600), Levine’s argument – at least where it pertains to *Americanah*’s ability to render racism strange – seems to rest on very similar assumptions. Indeed, the entire premise of defamiliarization works only for those who can actually be startled into recognizing the ubiquity of racism, thus suggesting the privilege of considering oneself an unmarked norm. Interestingly, Levine draws on two passages from classical realist texts, Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, to show their alignment with *Americanah*’s prose, their particular rendering “unusual” and noteworthy of what is otherwise habitual. However, the passage Levine selects from *Bleak House* is striking in more ways than Levine suggests. For her, it exemplifies Dickens’s interest in making “the ordinary feel shocking but also to make shocking the fact that it feels ordinary” (Levine 2015: 591). Levine quotes the passage in which the narrator presents the death of crossing-sweeper Jo as resulting from poverty. This poverty, in turn, is proffered as a wider effect of social neglect, embodied, in this case, by Mrs. Jellyby. While not commented upon by Levine, Mrs. Jellyby is satirized in *Bleak House* as an philanthropist wholly consumed with “Africa” and engaged in numerous charitable activities that channel her wealth and attention away from her immediate surroundings and into this “Telescopic Philanthropy.”<sup>66</sup> The passage quoted by Levine, its musings on how Jo isn’t “a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the

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66 See Robbins 1990 for a different reading of *Bleak House*’s chapter “Telescopic Philanthropy.”

ordinary home-made article,” marked by filth, parasites, sores, and “native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate,” does not only code the “homely” as the overlooked habitual, as Levine claims (2015: 591). It also permits a fairly obvious, and much more troubling, double meaning.

To the reader intimately familiar with racialization, colonialism, or indeed with the not only Victorian habit of racializing the poor, this passage conveys more than a meditation on the ordinariness of tragedy and indeed communicates an all too familiar logic which – not despite, but precisely because of its ordinariness – never ceases to make “the ordinary feel shocking.” As with Levine’s notion of racism defamiliarized by *Americanah*, it begs the question of who is allowed to become habituated, willfully or ignorantly so, and who is forced to repeatedly experience the habitual return of the same old. But perhaps this is exactly Levine’s point, as she lauds the way that “Ifemelu’s bluntness about the ordinariness of race and racism repeatedly startles white Americans out of their usual responses” (594). Her reading of the novel indeed illuminates the way *Americanah* tackles the parochialism of American race discourse, “endotically” reflecting back to a white liberal audience. But in its blind spots, Levine’s reading also reveals the very double-faced nature of the novel. Levine rightly notes how the novel sets out to voice uncomfortable truths, yet it is more or less up to the reader to determine which kind of notions are able to “jolt [...] us into a new alertness to a world we thought we knew” (603) and which represent blatantly obvious social facts, knowable to anyone, constantly endured by some. Put differently, what enables one to see the overt racism or blunt race talk engendered by the era of Obama as progressive change and who is left to see a still ugly present, inseparably tethered to the past? Such is the ambiguity of these conflicting levels or ambitions in the novel that even Levine’s nuanced appraisal of the novel’s defamiliarizing realism may convey the very myopia that the novel purportedly heals.

It is important to understand that *Americanah* is not merely positioned toward a liberal, white audience – even though it seems to specifically touch a nerve here – but is also celebrated and claimed by a wider diasporic or Pan-African imaginary, for example when the indelible Binyavanga Wainaina blurbs *Americanah* as “the Africa of our future. Sublime, powerful and the most political of [Adichie’s] novels.” Perhaps it is the politics of voicing and thus confirming everyday racism that draws particularly Black audiences to the novel and that also feeds into the celebration of Adichie as an “intellectual rock star” (Msimang 2017: para. 12).<sup>67</sup> In this sense, the novel’s ‘truth telling’ also appears to

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67 To offer a piece of anecdotal evidence, I myself was privy to this curiously divergent set of

hold a cathartic promise for Black audiences. Yet its positioning as a ‘Black novel’ for a Black audience can be best understood in its negotiation of the category of Blackness itself, as an account by a Non-American Black claiming a Blackness apart from a hegemonic American history.

#### 4 “A Bitter Americanizing”: Gendered Violence in the Aftermath of Slavery

*Americanah* is part of a discourse that diversifies notions of Blackness in the diaspora. This is what Goyal asserts when she notes that “the novel self-consciously foregrounds its own reception as a new kind of black novel, an exploration of blackness that does not highlight injury or trauma, but focuses on romantic love, hair, and nostalgia” (2014: xiv). It is, quite unequivocally, Adichie’s counterweight to “a single story” of Blackness. However, this does not mean that Adichie is not fully aware of the narrative she sets herself apart from and, in parts, rewrites to make her own. Though the mapping of US America’s racial landscape in *Americanah* never presents itself as an ahistorical inventory of a messy status quo, slavery appears as an irrelevant coordinate en route to Ifemelu’s Blackness – particularly because she ultimately doesn’t adopt an American Blackness but forges her own, confidently Pan-African Black identity. She nonetheless employs certain tropes and narrative strategies that suggest an engagement with the legacy of slavery. At second glance, and framed through the prominence of gender in *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s racialization occurs with and through a notion of femininity that is inextricably bound to slavery. In this sense, the epistemological crucible of slavery still remains a central concern for *Americanah*’s investigation of Blackness, albeit one that is negotiated and ultimately worked through and thus rendered a historical effect rather than an ontological conscription.

*Americanah* bears the traces of a particular tradition of female, or as Alice Walker would call it, womanist tradition of African-American writers.<sup>68</sup> In the

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expectations at an Adichie reading in Berlin in 2014, where the author was indeed greeted like a pop star. The audience was comprised of quite a few Black activist groups who explicitly thanked the author for writing a book that might help breach the subject of everyday racism in Germany, a topic Adichie seemed open to talk about – until her increasingly nervous white publisher stipulated that all audience questions had to relate to the novel only.

<sup>68</sup> Adichie’s often quoted TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story” opens with her memory of being exposed to English and American literature as a child and not thinking that “people like [her] could exist in literature.” This changes drastically when she discovers African writers. Adichie goes on to describe the detrimental effects of cultural stereotyping in various contexts and

same way that “the specter of lynching” haunts diasporic writing from Richard Wright to Teju Cole, so is rape and sexual exploitation a symbol for Black oppression primarily explored by African American women writers from Harriet Jacobs and Zora Neale Hurston to Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange. In her study on this field of writers, *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), Hazel Carby plainly states that the “institution of slavery is now widely regarded as the source of stereotypes about the black woman” (20). During an interview at the *Washington Ideas Forum*, Adichie noted that: “I like to say I’m happily black. [...] But in this country I came to realize [...] that meant something, that it came with baggage and with all of these assumptions” (Norris 2014: 00:04:34). That this baggage is historically linked to slavery is not spelled out in *Americanah*, but it is circumscribed in the one thing that initially causes a traumatic break with her past, namely the blunt commodification and sexual exploitation Ifemelu experiences in her encounter with the tennis coach.

Leading up to this scene are several chapters chronicling Ifemelu’s first months in the US, echoing common tropes of immigrant fiction such as culture shock, alienation, financial and legal insecurity. Ifemelu’s later success dwarfs this kind of experience, yet we are forced to witness it with full brunt in Obinze’s failed attempt at gaining a footing in the UK. His illegal residence status ultimately condemns him to a narrative path that runs directly from cleaning toilets to being forcefully deported, crushing his hopes and dreams on the way. Ifemelu, while afforded a more secured legal status, is in turn nearly crushed by the financial weight of living and studying in the US. Because she cannot work on her student visa, she attempts to find a job with another Nigerian woman’s social security number. For fear of being found out, she then starts looking for jobs that pay cash in hand, like the job with the tennis coach and finally the babysitting employment that gets her through college. The enormous economic pressures weighing on Ifemelu cause an increasing sense of hopelessness and despair and determine her particularly precarious social position. Ifemelu’s poverty makes her socially invisible and thus acutely vulnerable. Ironically, it is through the junk mail of a credit card preapproval – a predatory loan if there ever was one – that Ifemelu at one point is made to feel more present and “a little less invisible” (132).

The tennis coach is described as a short, muscly white man from the suburbs, who routinely has inner-city students travel out to him to provide sexual

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ends on a quote by Alice Walker. Where, in other contexts, Adichie often supplements the “English and American” with Enid Blyton, and the “African writers” have often been equated with Chinua Achebe, I believe that the third touchstone in her writer’s genesis is too easily overlooked.

favors for cash. While Ifemelu describes the encounter with him as "sordid" (154), it is particularly the ruthlessly commercial nature of their exchange, his "venal" and "corrupt" air that stands out for her (143). He is, as it turns out, not simply one of "those white men she had read about, with strange tastes, who wanted women to drag a feather over their back or urinate on them" (153). He isn't motivated by a perverse fetish, but by cold calculation, the type of man who doesn't like to waste time and says things like "So here's the deal," "It's a great gig," or "If you want the job you can have it" (143). It is not only because Ifemelu receives money that this encounter is framed by an absolute commodification, from his "mercilessly sizing her up" to the business-like dismissal afterwards. Ifemelu decides to take the job out of utter desperation yet is determined to enter into this transaction on her own terms, applying lipstick and contemplating her personal boundaries beforehand. Once Ifemelu enters his house, she senses that none of her self-determination will change the way that the system is set up against her:

The power balance was tilted in his favor, had been tilted in his favor since she walked into his house. She should leave. She stood up. "I can't have sex," she said. Her voice felt squeaky, unsure of itself. "I can't have sex with you," she repeated.

"Oh no, I don't expect you to," he said, too quickly. She moved slowly toward the door, wondering if it was locked, if he had locked it, and then she wondered if he had a gun. (153)

While fear definitely plays a role in Ifemelu's compliance, what ultimately breaks her is the man's complete assuredness about her acting in a certain way. It seems as though she has entered a ritualized transaction that forces her to comply with the rules of the game. While Ifemelu feels "defeated," he already seems to know "she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted" (154). Afterwards, she feels most ashamed and repulsed by the fact that her body had responded automatically. While critic Seth Cosimini interprets this as a subtle investigation of the question of consent, the way it connects with both character and story development suggests otherwise. Ifemelu experiences a pronounced disconnect between her motive will and her body. Thrice announcing her dissent ("She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear"), her body nevertheless responds with a "sickening arousal," as if it "no longer belonged to her" (154). Her body's 'mechanical' reaction leaves Ifemelu feeling dehumanized and thing-like.

While the scene is far from equivocal, the point is not whether her desire or consent are conflicted but that, in effect, Ifemelu suffers from this encounter. It becomes the most dehumanizing and scarring experience she makes in the US. Across the Atlantic, Obinze's utterly negative experience in the UK equally culmi-

nates in the objectifying experience of being “removed” from the country: “That word made Obinze feel inanimate. A thing to be removed. A thing without breath and mind. A thing” (279). Yet in Ifemelu’s case, the dynamics of class, race, and gender converge in a very distinct form of objectification and vulnerability. Ifemelu finds herself in a situation where the simple fact of her body turns against her, where the commercial objectification of her body is directly linked to the way it is marked, the facade of equal transaction notwithstanding. In finding herself in the tennis coach’s house, placed in and subjected to a particular network of power, she is “already tainted.” This dynamic resembles the one Hartman describes in a discussion of a young Black girl’s pornographic photograph in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*: “[H]er body was already marked by a history of sexual defilement, already branded as a commodity. Its availability to be used, to be hurt, was foundational to the prevailing set of social arrangements, in which she was formally free and vulnerable to the triple jeopardy of economic, racial, and sexual violence” (2019: 29).

Ifemelu’s enhanced vulnerability as a Black woman, her multiple entanglement in what Patricia Hill Collins has coined the “matrix of domination,” leads to a complete commodification and dehumanization and poses a sustained threat to her sense of self (Hill Collins 2000: 18). While, in the larger context of Adichie’s writing, objectifications, sexualized violence, and discrimination are seen as global issues, there is a level of “sordidness” to her utter dependency that pushes Ifemelu over the edge.<sup>69</sup> Her strange sense of complicity and powerlessness emphasizes how Ifemelu finds herself thrust into structures that vastly exceed her range of autonomy – economic and social structures disastrously interacting with a deep and entrenched repository of stereotypes about Black womanhood.

Throughout the novel, Ifemelu’s experience as a Black woman in the US ranges from blunt objectification, oversexualization, and fetishization to not

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<sup>69</sup> Looking at Adichie’s earlier writing, sexual violence is not an unfamiliar theme. Her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* deals explicitly with the omnipresence of rape and violence against women during the Biafran War. Adichie’s representations of sexual violence are, however, not limited to such spectacular settings but extend to everyday experience of contemporary Nigerian women – within the domestic space but also in its insidious coupling with the power dynamics of the workplace. In the short story “Jumping Monkey Hill,” for example, a character experiences various forms of sexual harassment while trying to secure a job in Lagos. Ifemelu’s experience with the tennis coach is therefore, thematically, not particularly exceptional. And while it frames their encounter in a distinct way, neither is his whiteness per se. Earlier on in her job search, Ifemelu encounters a Mexican who, lewdly staring at her chest, suggests that she may “work for him in another way” (145). What becomes clear then, is that Black women find themselves at the bottom rung of any social order.

being considered female at all. Various levels of visibility, invisibility, and hyper-visibility combine with distinct stereotypes, all of which can be traced to "scientific" racism in general and slavery in particular. The sexualized transaction with the tennis coach most poignantly highlights the reverberations of what Adrienne Davis has termed the "sexual economy of slavery," where legal and political arrangements "systematically expropriated black women's sexuality and reproductive capacity for white pleasure and profit" (2002: 105). Writing about the emergence of the African American woman writer, Carby elaborates on the long lasting impact of sexualized violence under slavery. She notes that while "rape has always involved patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting a sexual attack," the alleged complicity of Black women in the subordination of Black men has rendered institutionalized rape a less powerful symbol for racial oppression than the spectacle of lynching (1987: 39).

At the same time, the systemic rape of enslaved women occurred outside and against a notion of white Victorian womanhood, rendering these violations not only morally permissible but also literally unspeakable, as Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and its contemporaneous circulation and instrumentalization illustrate. As Ulla Haselstein notes, it is precisely the glaring contradictions emerging from the moral charges of the sentimental novel and their inapplicability to its utterly vulnerable protagonist that render Jacob's narrative a potent indictment of slavery (2000: 133). Nevertheless, the text foregrounds its inability to adequately represent the trauma of slavery within the symbolic order of white culture by simultaneously veiling and unveiling the sexual economy of slavery (Haselstein 2000: 143). The only way that these extralegal violations could be framed, both by white women and antebellum courts, was through the perpetuation of what Saidiya Hartman identifies as the "discourse of seduction," further obscuring "the primacy and extremity of violence in master-slave relations and in the construction of the slave as both property and person" (1996: 538).

The "powerful ideological consequences" of these implicit accusations feed into common assumptions about the corruptible and corrupting sexuality of Black women, oscillating between images of lascivious Jezebels and emasculating matriarchs and reifying in studies like the infamous Moynihan report (Carby 1987: 39). It is the latter's attempt at pathologizing African American family relations that serves as the starting point of Hortense Spillers seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" from 1987. Here, Spillers explores the impacts of an anti-Black discourse routed in slavery, particularly in regard to female subjectivity. From a discussion of the mid-60s report, Spillers moves on to discuss notions of gendering and ungendering as the prelude to a

“bitter Americanizing for African persons” (2003: 216). While the “quintessential ‘slave,’” she notes, “is *not* a male but a female” (215), Spillers focuses particularly on how the “zero degree of social conceptualization” (206) that accompanies enslavement effectively eradicates gender difference, severing “the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” and turning it into totally objectified, ungendered “flesh” (2003: 67). Afro-pessimist thinkers have extensively picked up on this notion of barred subject positions, arguing that slave subjectivity exists prior to or outside of the symbolic realm. Where Frank Wilderson specifically focuses on the process of ungendering through what he calls “gratuitous violence,” I would hesitate to prematurely dispose of the category of gender in the context of racialization (Wilderson 2010: 34). Surely, Spillers’ text requires one to recognize that slavery and its aftermath render the question of African-American womanhood more vexed than it is cursorily understood. The problematizing of gender in African American family relations, she concludes, mustn’t result in the desire of “joining the ranks of gendered femaleness,” but instead might allow one to imagine “a radically different text for female empowerment” (2003: 229).

In *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, Anne Anlin Cheng notes how the “contemporary American attachment to progress and healing, eagerly anticipating a colorblind society, sidesteps the important examination of racialization: How is a racial identity secured?” (2001: 7). In many ways, *Americanah* is an exploration of precisely this process, and equally from the pronounced intersectional perspective that Cheng identifies in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*. In all of these texts, “reading race is a prerequisite to reading femininity [...]. [They] show how femininity (what it means to be a girl) comes to acquire its social and aesthetic values under the signs of racial difference” (Cheng 2001: 19). Of course, *Americanah* cannot be neatly placed within a genealogy of Black feminist thought. Rather, it signals Adichie’s individual, post-independence African engagement with issues of race and gender. There is, Adichie, acknowledges, a particular coming to being (or non-being, as Afro-pessimists like Wilderson would argue) of Blackness that cannot be unhinged from slavery, and that takes on a defining centrality in the US. Yet *Americanah* deftly illustrates how Blackness is also affected by issues of locality, class and, above all, gender. As such, the scene signals how it is one thing to become Black in America and another to become a Black woman. The novel’s frank and realist description of Ifemelu’s particular vulnerability could be read as Adichie’s exploration of the historicity of racial and gendered scripts and the socio-economic structures keeping these histories alive.

The way that Ifemelu’s experience of extreme poverty intersects with race, gender, and citizenship thus highlights the kind of distinction Nancy Fraser draws between exploitation and expropriation. Arguing against the infamous Marxist notion of “side contradictions,” or, for that matter, any political proposition that neglects an anti-racist critique in favor of a purportedly more basal critique of economic structures, Fraser warns against obfuscating “capitalism’s deep-seated entanglement with racial oppression.” She proposes a three-tier model that expands the concept of exploitation, itself a corrective to a limited model of exchange, with the historically even more obfuscated aspect of expropriation (Fraser 2016: 166). While exploitation may still operate under the guise of contractual agreements, expropriation entirely dispenses with this legal tenet, substituting contracts with conscription and confiscation. Considering the historical roots of capitalism, such as the primitive accumulation of colonialism or the unwaged labor of New World slavery, Fraser points toward the close correlation between expropriation and racial subordination that leads her to schematize this relation not only historically, but also structurally. In an interview with George Yancy she summarizes her argument as such:

Capitalism harbors a deep-structural distinction, at once economic and political, between exploitation and expropriation, a distinction that coincides with “the color line.” I can also state the point in a different way: the racializing dynamics of capitalist society are crystallized in the “mark” that distinguishes free subjects of exploitation from dependent subjects of expropriation. (2016: 172)

Apart from its structural entrenchedness in capitalism, Fraser identifies the ongoing legacy of slavery and colonialism mostly through its institutionalized forms such as segregation or Jim Crow, or the unequal exchange with, and unjust “structural adjustments” demanded of, post-independent African states. Without entirely unraveling this complex node of history and lived experience, her usage of the term “mark” also points toward the insidious way racialization harks back to and inhabits the body, the skin, the self: Fanon’s racial epidermal schema.

When Ifemelu ‘becomes Black’ in America, it is not only, but crucially so, through an experience that couples a distinct historical with a distinct physical configuration – an experience wrought by race in/as history. It is a situation that reveals the disproportionate viability of certain bodies to expropriation, and it also expounds the problematic historicity of Black American womanhood. In sum, *Americanah*’s narrative emphasis on the encounter with the tennis coach scene is anything but coincidental but marks an engagement with Black American racialization from a particularly gendered perspective. *Americanah*’s more or less subtle investigation of Black subjectivity, as a carefully constructed exer-

cise in intersectionality, affirms how class, gender, sexuality, and nationality all play into Ifemelu's experience of Blackness.

Although I would not want to extend the analogy too far by comparing Ifemelu's experience to the rape of enslaved women, mapping her narrative onto Harriet Jacobs's or suggesting that this incident signals something akin to her personal Middle Passage, I would still contend that, within the logic of the romance narrative, it indeed operates as a violent, traumatic break with her past that engenders an initial loss of self through the circling movement of racial melancholia. Crucially, however, this moment is followed by an almost cathartic route to self-affirmation and rebirth as soon as she stops trying to assimilate and confidently voices her own Africanness. Toward the end of the novel, Ifemelu finally tells Obinze about her traumatic experience. She opens with, "I hated myself. I really hated myself. I felt like I had, I don't know, betrayed myself," and concludes with the words: "I remember it, but I don't dwell on it," claiming that she has passed from melancholy to mourning (439).

Before this is allowed to happen, however, Ifemelu experiences this "bitter Americanizing," characterized by the loss of home, her sense of identity, and her voice. After the incident, she is unable to reach out to Obinze. In fact, Nigeria and Obinze conflate, leaving her utterly uprooted: "She no longer read the news on Nigeria.com because each headline, even the most unlikely ones, somehow reminded her of Obinze" (159). In a way, this conscious forgetting of Obinze mimics the Americanization of enslaved Africans in what Homi Bhabha has referred to as the "syntax of forgetting" inherent in nation building (2004: 160). It is precisely this traumatic break with her past that forces her to grapple with America in a way that is distinct from both the "lost" generation of immigrants, who are fighting "on the Internet over their mythologies of home, because home was now a blurred place between here and there" (117), and the flexible, young Nigerians like Dike or Ginika, who have 'mastered' American culture simply because it has "seeped into [their] skin" (125).

Directly following her experience with the tennis coach, Ifemelu experiences her first snow,<sup>70</sup> announcing her ensuing depression:

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**70** It is not difficult to infer a certain symbolism to "That night, it snowed," signaling how Ifemelu is cloaked in a hostile culture of whiteness, truly far from home. To this effect, it is a fairly well-established trope, from the snowstorm in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, leading to Bigger's arrest, and the various qualities of snow in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*'s eviction scene, to the recurrent postcolonial theme of "snow on the cane fields." It is also quite common in contemporary African writing, with NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) relying heavily on the symbolic significance of snow. Fanon, too, concludes the description of racial interpellation with a reference to snow: "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored,

That night, it snowed, her first snow, and in the morning, she watched the world outside her window, the parked cars made lumpy, misshapen, by layered snow. She was bloodless, detached, floating in a world where darkness descended too soon and everyone walked around burdened by coats, and flattened by the absence of light. The days drained into one another, crisp air turning to freezing air, painful to inhale. Obinze called many times but she did not pick up her phone. She deleted his voice messages unheard and his e-mails unread, and she felt herself sinking, sinking quickly, and unable to pull herself up. (155)

When she emerges from this depression, two chapters on, she has found her voice. And it is on the same day she decides to “stop faking an American accent” that she meets Blaine. Even though their paths will not cross again for years to come, Ifemelu is sure of the “significance to her meeting this man on the day she returned her voice to herself” (180). At this point, she considers herself to be better at distinguishing African Americans from other American Blacks, claiming that she has learned to detect “the fine-grained mark that culture stamps on people.” Right away, Ifemelu “knows” that Blaine is “a descendent of the black men and women who had been in America for hundreds of years” (176). Perhaps this knowledge is gained through a certain aloofness, the kind of outsider’s perspective that is perhaps the most salient aspect of the Afropolitan, that is: a subject position unencumbered by the ‘not white – not quite’ impasse, the impossible assimilation of the postcolonial or immigrant subject, but characterized instead by her own, insular sense of self that is perhaps best described as a global, Pan-African identity, gloriously emerging from what would otherwise threaten to crush her.

## 5 “An American Pathology”: Reading *Americanah* as Quest Romance

As Adichie remarked in an interview about the novel: “I am more or less expected, or maybe permitted, to write about African pathology, but I don’t think I am expected to write about American pathology” (Sehgal 2013: para. 21). At this point, it may be useful to distinguish what the novel’s turn toward realism accomplishes, and where it resorts to the form of romance that, as Goyal summa-

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clad in mourning in that white winter day” (86). The snow in *Americanah* also indicates Ifemelu’s winter of the soul, the onset of the depression anticipated by the reference to Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay” at the beginning of the chapter (144). This kind of overdetermined symbolism is rare in *Americanah*, but it clearly marks the significance of this caesura, affecting not only Ifemelu’s life, but also the overall narrative momentum of the novel.

rizes, marks a “shift outside of realism into the sphere of the marvelous rather than the mundane, often organized around the motif of a quest into unknown territories (both physical and the uncanny zone of the self)” (2010: 13). If racism is America’s pathology, what is the function or effect of the novel’s engagement with it? Is it a means of diagnosis or does it, in part, even suggest a cure? And as such, does it fashion its cure as an antidote or a miracle?

On the one hand, Adichie paints her story from a particularly complex angle of America’s racial landscape, at a particularly complex moment in time. Set at the onset of a proclaimed post-racial age in the US, it is written at a time when this very same proclamation serves as foil to the true shape of American racism. While, from a certain point of view, the US appears to be caught in the lock of a history wrought by slavery, Blackness never stays the same. The narratives, models, and modes of being Black change and multiply, both globally and in the US. Ifemelu, a “Bourgie Nigerian” (177) predominantly moving through “Postbourgie” (414) Black America, nevertheless witnesses first-hand how a certain, most dehumanizing form of Blackness refuses to leave the equation.

Therefore, the novel’s realist description of America’s racial landscape renders Ifemelu’s hard-won experience of becoming Black in the US an exercise in attaining the informed, self-consciously metahistorical positionality of Afropolitanism. Her perspective allows her, while not to transcend it, at least to distance herself enough to not only *see* Blackness in this country, but to *know its name*. Analogous to her increasing class privileges, this positionality does not make her immune to racism, but it enables her to disassociate herself from it, at least partially, in order to critique it.

In some ways, the distance Ifemelu has gained speaks to the “psychological distance” Richard Wright detects between African Americans and their country, directly resulting from the experience of violent subjugation and slavery (1995: 81). But Ifemelu’s position is, of course, different from such established models of race consciousness. One could say that Ifemelu is behind the veil but not of it and that this may allow her to not “really feel what she is writing about,” to ward off the pathological danger of American racialization. Neither (merely) ‘second-sight,’ nor ‘double consciousness,’ the insights Ifemelu has gained only structurally resemble those of African Americans.<sup>71</sup> Regarding her own, intensely felt in-

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71 Here, I refer to this much quoted passage in Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*: “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always

stance of racialized gendered objectification, Ifemelu has apparently worked through her grief and exited the circling movement of melancholia. As such, the realism of the novel presents racism as a problem to be solved, or cured, at least for a character like Ifemelu.

However, it is altogether possible to frame Ifemelu's transformation in less realist and more fantastical terms in the same way in which race and racism can be rendered both real and tangible, and magically abstract. Similarly, as Brent Hayes Edwards notes in the introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois's usage of the term "veil" suggested a move away from race as a purely sociological category toward a more mythical, obfuscated presence better described in the "spiritual vocabulary of German Romanticism" (Du Bois and Hayes Edwards 2007: xiv). *Americanah* also foregrounds its literary rather than sociological purport by couching its diagnosis of American racism – and Ifemelu's realist *Bildung* – within a romantic gesture toward Pan-Africanism and the logic of a fantastic quest-romance. The latter becomes particularly apparent both in the way that the subject of racialization connects to the novel's narrative structure, and in what I would describe as the novel's tone, which assumes a particular naiveté in order to voice a more 'truthful' image of American racism.

Despite its ostensive realism, *Americanah* formally functions like a romance, not only in the sense of genre fiction, but also in terms of the particular romance paradigm described by Northrop Frye. Identifying romance as indeed the "structural core of all fiction" (1976: 15), Frye's entry in *The Harper Handbook to Literature* defines it as "a continuous narrative in which the emphasis is on what happens in the plot, rather than on what is reflected from ordinary life or experience" (1997: 403). Besides its plot-driven narrative, *Americanah* is also characterized by what Frye describes as the mode of romance in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). As Fredric Jameson notes, Frye understands romance as "a wish fulfillment or utopian fantasy, which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday reality" (1975: 138). Interpreting *Americanah* as not only popular romance, but also as quest-romance, the novel thus turns "our attention to those elements in the ordinary world which must be transformed, if the earthly paradise is to reveal its lineaments behind it" (Jameson 1975: 138).

Barbara Fuchs, in her concise monograph on the subject, also identifies romance as a fundamental stratum of narrative, not necessarily in the archetypal sense proposed by Frye, but as narratological device or strategy of form and content. In line with Peter Brooks's assertion that the meaning of narratives may

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looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (2007: 8).

only be discernible “because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of plot” (1984:94), *Americanah*’s ending crucially informs its quest romance plot. Examining the implications of *Americanah*’s romantic return to Nigeria in terms of narrative strategy, it is worthwhile to focus also on the detours that make such a resolve possible. As Fuchs notes, most critics of romance “emphasize its ultimate wish-fulfillment while disregarding the often complex picture of suffering and subjugation that precedes the resolution” (2004: 29). If we look at *Americanah*’s ending according to the logic of a realist *Bildungsroman* as well as that of a quest romance, Ifemelu emerges not only as romantically and intellectually matured heroine, but also as someone who has undergone the arduous social process of ‘becoming Black’ in a foreign land. Tried and tested, Ifemelu thence returns to Nigeria, where she is allowed to step “off the plane in Lagos and [stop] being black” (475). Rather than reading this only as a rekindling of redemptive diasporic return or a disassociation of Blackness, this perspective on the novel’s ending might draw attention to the “suffering and subjugation” Ifemelu has undergone in the US: she has been racialized.

Like the hero of a classical romance adventure, *Americanah*’s protagonist ventures into the dangerous, dreamlike realm that is US America, only that instead of witches and ogres she encounters the particularly stupefying, spell-binding power of what Karen and Barbara Fields, in their eponymous essay compendium on US-American race relations, have coined “racecraft.” Both witchcraft and racecraft, they write, “are imagined, acted upon, and re-imagined, the action and imagining inextricably intertwined” (2014: 19). Pointing toward the particular pervasiveness of racism, its stubborn “efficacy” beyond rational realizations of race constructedness, they draw attention to the analogous relation between the two concepts, their mutual reliance on “circular reasoning, prevalence of confirming rituals, barriers to disconfirming factual evidence, self-fulfilling prophecies, multiple and inconsistent causal ideas, and colorfully inventive folk genetics” (Fields and Fields 2014: 198). And so, in *Americanah*, the “pervasive belief” in and of racecraft becomes the “mental terrain” that Ifemelu too must learn to navigate (*ibid.* 18).

This also affects the novel’s particular tone and, for some, allows a reading of Ifemelu as voicing purportedly unheard of and never-noticed truths. Applied to the novel and its generic conventions, Ifemelu’s stance toward US race relations adheres to the narrative tropes of romance, where “the hero’s dominant trait is naiveté or inexperience” and his “most characteristic posture is that of bewilderment” (Jameson 1975: 139). Furthermore, the pose of the naïve and bewildered outsider is of course predetermined by the novel’s generic anchoring in romance. Like the hero of romance, who is at first more of “an observer,

a moral spectator surprised by supernatural conflict,” Ifemelu too is “gradually drawn in, to reap the rewards of victory” (Jameson 1975: 139).

The story line of Ifemelu’s race blog is particularly instructive here. At first, the blog is presented as a positive force in her life, a literalized transformation of her observational quest that gives her financial independence and amplifies her voice. As a textual medium, it also foregrounds the utopian promise of generating a feminist or subaltern counterdiscourse. While, in this fast-paced digital word, there is something quite dated about a literary character whose livelihood subsists in writing a successful blog, during the mid-2000s the notion of blogging arguably marked the idea, or rather ideal, of a new public sphere along with the hope for a theretofore-unknown inclusion of marginalized voices. In its ostentatious presentation as a platform for disenfranchised or structurally silenced voices, online discourse in the novel thus embodies the “counterpublic” or “alternative public spheres” envisioned by feminist scholars such as Rita Felski (1989) or Nancy Fraser (1990). Embodying the feminist dictum that the private is political, Ifemelu’s observations on matters of race and racism are, with few exceptions, drawn from everyday life and personal experience. Mimetically, the main narrative of *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s life in America, relates to the blog in a manner that also reveals the former’s status as quest romance. For example, when Ifemelu writes about her relationships, she presents her partners as cultural tropes, referring to Curt as “Hot White Ex” and Blaine as “Professor Hunk.” In the ‘real life’ of *Americanah*’s diegesis, the names *Curt* for her *courteous*, rich, WASP and *Blaine* for her *black*, Jazz-loving, political-science-teaching boyfriend also read like cyphers. As each of her partners opens up a new window into American race relations, they function as formulaic figures in her ‘racial adventure story.’

Encapsulated in the somewhat naïve claim that Ifemelu came “from a country where race was not an issue” is the assumption that she had to “come to America” to ‘become Black’ and also to become the acclaimed race blogger leading a charmed financial existence. Ironically, the ability to see and name race, while allowing her to monitor and measure racist aggressions, ultimately enables her to transcend her dismal economic situation and social dependency. Set in the gold-digging era of digital content, Ifemelu’s blog signifies the promise that a Black woman, and a non-citizen as such, can add her voice to the choir of public discourse, be individually heard, and eventually join the ranks of America’s intellectual elite. This particular riff on the American Dream obviously draws much impetus from the post-race era in which it is set, but it also draws on an established immigrant narrative. Ifemelu’s almost mythical journey from impoverished African student, living in a moldy apartment, to Princeton fellow, traveling the country on speaking gigs and owning a condominium, is as unre-

alistic as it is economically aspirational. It also renders her decision to leave this life behind, to sell both her lucrative blog and her condo in the midst of an unfolding, and unmentioned, financial crisis and leave the US for Nigeria, all the more interesting.

If racial capitalism is also “the process of deriving social and economic value from racial identity,” then, paradoxically, Ifemelu can generate capital from performing a certain kind of Black racial identity, one that slots into the context of corporate diversity trainings and neoliberal multiculturalism (Leong 2013: 2189). In a sense, Ifemelu’s later career runs on the currency of what Gilroy has described as “racial *Americanah*” – a mode of talking about and indeed marketing race that, while repeatedly provincializing itself, simultaneously asserts its global reach (Fisher 2014: 210).<sup>72</sup> Clearly, the blog’s financial success and political impact are not enough to sustain Ifemelu’s sense of victory, of having successfully countered the evils of racecraft. On the contrary, this racial performance eventually appears to stump her character development and forestall her quest. As noted above, her sense of accomplishment regarding the blog eventually sours, rendering it “inconsequential” (354), and leaving her feeling “naked and false” (5).

In addition, the novel’s plot and structure preordain its happy ending in a particular way, necessarily eclipsing a hopeful romance with America. The break with Obinze, caused by Ifemelu’s experience of sexual exploitation and signaling the ‘darkest night’ of her adventure, prompts the major detours in her romantic quest. It is the plot point the novel has anticipated and worked toward. Set within the novel’s frame narrative, which promises the imminent reunion of these star-crossed lovers, everything following the event triggers the kind of genre-typical, libidinous reading pleasure that arises from knowing that each and every detour will only bring the narrative closer to the inevitable end – a romantic climax made even sweeter by its deferral. Concerning the novel’s ambiguous straddling of different genres, it is worthwhile to consider what their employment enables and what kind of conclusions it predetermines. Fundamentally, *Americanah* is a tale about a female heroine’s move toward self-knowledge; it’s a classic romantic adventure with a happy ending. It is also, as Adichie herself has claimed, “a gritty, taken-from-real-life book [...] about race.” How do these aspects go together? How can there ever be a happy ending in race? The answer is, obviously, by having race end. Asked whether she con-

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<sup>72</sup> This reach follows from the global circulation of commodified cultural objects, where rampant consumption, for example of Black music, strips these objects of their moral and political dimensions. See also Gilroy 2010.

tinues to write about race in her Nigerian blog, Ifemelu replies: “No, just about life. Race doesn’t really work here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black” (476).

## 6 “An Unapologetic Love Story”: Adichie’s Gendered Romance with Africa

Adichie herself has called *Americanah* an “unapologetic” love story, and it is indeed remarkable how extensively it adheres to and inverts the narrative strategies of romantic genre fiction (Sehgal 2013: para. 15). To offer some anecdotal insight, I once overheard two women in a café discussing the book. While the first woman thoroughly enjoyed the novel and its protagonists, the other found it “unrealistic” how romantically popular Ifemelu was, with each successive boyfriend getting “better,” all of them “worshipping the ground under her feet.” I can see how the generic rendering of Ifemelu as a flawed, but nevertheless fairly idealized heroine can be grating to some and deeply pleasurable to others. Yet, as I have argued, the novel employs different generic forms to a political effect, and it is worth examining the function of romantic genre fiction in *Americanah* beyond questions of ‘high’ and ‘low,’ marketability, or popularity.

Where the protagonist Ifemelu may deem Mills & Boon romances “silly” while nevertheless conceding to a “small truth in those romances” (*Americanah* 58), Adichie is more candid about her early passion for romantic genre fiction, claiming that she must have read “every Mills & Boon romance published before [she] was sixteen” (2014: 10). Elsewhere, she has called *Americanah* an “anti-Mills & Boon” novel, and her knowledge of the genre transpires clearly (Smith 2014: 00:21:23). Even without the intertextual and contextual references to romantic fiction, the novel can be linked to the genre of romance simply on behalf of what may be cursorily described as the readerly pleasure it evokes, as well as its form. It is not difficult to see how the “anti” in “anti-Mills & Boon” applies, considering a genre notorious for its reinforcement of traditional, perhaps even anti-feminist gender roles. According to some critics, 20<sup>th</sup>-century feminist updatings of Mills & Boon or Harlequin novels have proven difficult, if not impossible, due to the genre’s rigid scripting of male-female relationships. For many, the bone of contention is these novels’ emphasis on female dependency. In one study on Mills & Boon fiction, Sandra Engler observes that “[f]emale independence is presented as an extremely undesirable attribute for a woman which prevents her from achieving her ultimate goal – marriage” (2004: 33).

Cursorily viewed, *Americanah* employs a marriage plot while withholding the marriage. Ifemelu and Obinze are reunited only for a brief period, after

which Obinze ends the extramarital affair out of a sense of responsibility to his wife and daughter. Despite the ensuing heartbreak, we are told that Ifemelu, at some point, has finally “spun herself fully into being” (475) by finding a way to connect with and write about Lagos. On the very last page of the novel, Obinze appears on Ifemelu’s doorstep and begs her to “give this a chance,” and Ifemelu finally allows him to come in. Arguably, *Americanah* forecloses the goal of marriage only in so far that it is projected into an unnarrated future. Yet compared to the preceding account of Ifemelu’s self-knowing, emotional, and financial independence, the ending, while romantic, appears as an anticlimactic afterthought. Though I would suspect most readers to be relieved at Obinze’s reappearance, inviting us to at least imagine their future union, the sense of closure preceding the actual ending does intimate that *Americanah* may follow the plotline of the conventional love story, yet the only ‘marriage’ that occurs is that of Ifemelu and her sense of self and home.

Simply applied to the script of romantic genre fiction, this sort of rewriting would seem to be a somewhat obvious, unconvincing choice. Deferring the actual marriage and presenting an independent, self-confident heroine in lieu of a dependent bride merely updates this kind of plotting with a similarly clichéd fairy tale ending, namely that of the headstrong, self-reliant woman who defies social conventions – and finds love after all. Yet much of *Americanah* suggests that not (only) the romantic love for Obinze, but a romantic desire for Africa and Nigeria function as prime motivators or stand-in goals on Ifemelu’s path to self-knowledge.

At the core of the novel’s carefully crafted realism and its quest-romance-like structure lies a romantic gesture that makes it “an unapologetic love story” and allows Adichie to write about Africa in unexpected ways. Told in the language of everyday life, *Americanah* is a romantic love story, but it is also a romance in the fanciful and marvelous way that renders the heroine Ifemelu’s quest for self-knowledge pleausurably unrealistic. Ifemelu’s already fairly charmed existence in the United States is surpassed even by the happy ending Nigeria provides, where Ifemelu is able to quit a safe but boring editor’s position in favor of writing a blog that eventually reads “like poetry.” Only utopian fantasy could equip a protagonist with the arguably least lucrative literary occupation and still suspend disbelief. The blog, as the sole vehicle of Ifemelu’s success and independence, notably evolves from the engagé American race blog that threatened to strip Ifemelu of her identity, to a grounded and grounding, ‘authentic’ representation of life in Nigeria. The Nigerian incarnation of her blog, titled *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, initially features posts that maintain her “provok[ing]” (415), “self-righteous” (435) style of social commentary. With time, she begins to write

about Lagos as it presents itself to her. Still suffering from the breakup with Obinze, Ifemelu almost therapeutically writes her new self into existence.

The opening chapter of *Americanah* already highlights the significance of Nigerian soil for Ifemelu’s sense of identity. Voicing her creeping dissatisfaction with American life, Ifemelu describes her homesickness as a “dull ache of loss” causing “amorphous longings, shapeless desires” (6). Indistinguishable from the fact that it is also where Obinze is, Nigeria becomes for her “where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil” (*ibid.*). When Ifemelu returns after being away for over a decade, she needs time to adapt to the dazzling urbanity of Lagos, a place so overpowering and energetic that the US, particularly her former life in Princeton, seems bucolic in comparison. Yet whatever processes of maturity she has undergone in America, this is where her new self is truly hatched: “Here, she felt, anything could happen, a ripe tomato could burst out of solid stone. And so she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar” (385).

Lagos is shown to be a dynamic, ever changing place that is nevertheless home. It becomes the desired locus for a fluctuant self’s need to be in touch with itself, know itself, and find an authentic voice. In this respect, the novel clearly rehashes a notion of Africa as rejuvenating and rooting and of diasporic return as an authenticating experience. However, by stressing the vibrancy of Lagos, along with the “dizzying” sensation of falling and “sp[inning] herself into being,” Adichie is careful to distinguish this familiar diasporic trope from the kind that aligns Africa with the idea of a stable, traditional, and unchanging essence. Careful not to perpetuate a certain romantic desire for Africa, at this point in particular the realism of the narrative is asked to bear the weight of *Americanah*’s romantic thrust.

The change that Ifemelu has undergone, while rendering her more ‘authentic,’ mirrors Nigeria’s pulsating and unpredictable potential, that of a literally young country on the cusp of a new era. Katherine Hallemeier reads the novel as a challenge to the assumption that the United States remains “at the center of economic and cultural geopolitics,” because, for her, “*Americanah* presents an alternative, utopic vision of global power in which the United States stands as a foil to the promising future of late Nigerian capitalism” (2015: 231). While Adichie’s careful observations of class relations in Euro-American and Nigerian contexts indeed point toward an image of Nigeria as a socioeconomically distinct, if not rivaling hub, of global capitalism, I would still want to retain the unavoidably hegemonic role the United States takes on in the racial discourse that structures *Americanah* in as many and perhaps more important ways than economic or class discourses.

Compared with vibrant and young Nigeria, America is represented as bucolic and sleepy and appears downright archaic in its tribalism and racist lore. For the novel's predominantly 'Western' reader, contemporary Nigeria thus appears as strange but familiar locus, driven by the creative destruction of capitalism rather than being pulled back by the feudal mythology of racism. Here, the novel employs the alleged "archaism and fantasy of racism" that Bhabha detects in prominent writings on modernity by Foucault and Anderson (2004: 358). Yet the novel moves it from the colonial site in which Anderson sees it being acted out to the alleged endpoint of Western progress itself – America. Reversing the script, Nigeria emerges as the supremely rational nation state, and the fateful ties of racism and capitalism appear consciously, and wishfully, uncoupled. Framed though the temporal discourse of race and progress, the novel's ending thus becomes even more crucial, relying heavily on the hopeful, futuristic thrust of romance and signifying a decidedly progressive, alternative historical arc.

From a diasporic perspective, one that addresses a diasporic audience and is located within the already alternative spatio-temporal mappings of the Black Atlantic, *Americanah's* ending serves yet another purpose. Its invocation of the fantasy of return, along with the promise of rootedness and self-knowledge, performs a similarly "compensatory" function to that of the fantasy of unconditional love Janice Radway identifies in typical romantic genre fiction (1984: 88–95). Yet the gendered emphases of this genre also allow the novel to remove its rose-tinted glasses with regards to gender equality and sexism, showing instead the multiple ways in which Nigerian women from all rungs of society are stifled and stumped in their development. Read thus, Nigeria may be presented as the future, but it is far from perfect. Here, the novel employs a bleaker vision of post-independence and a similar critique of postcolonial progress to the one issued by McClintock:

In a world where women do 2/3 of the world's work, earn 10% of the world's income, and own less than 1% of the world's property, the promise of "post-colonialism" has been a history of hopes postponed. It has generally gone unremarked that the national bourgeoisies and kleptocracies that stepped into the shoes of "post-colonial" "progress," and industrial "modernization" have been overwhelmingly and violently male. (1992: 92)

In sum, the novel's unequivocally gendered anchoring, the love story, becomes the most interesting lens through which to view Africa and its diaspora. This also corresponds with the fact that Adichie is an outspokenly feminist writer and, while her politics are of course distinct from its earlier incarnations, also a Pan-Africanist.

Alongside her literary works, Adichie has published two book-length essays, both on the matter of feminism. First an adapted version of her popular TED talk

*We Should All Be Feminists* in 2014, following in the slipstream of *Americanah*, and a second slim volume titled *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017). Subsequently, Adichie collaborated with high fashion brand Christian Dior, who printed the TED talk title turned pop sample turned bestselling essay on t-shirts and sent it down the run way. For all the ease with which Adichie literally wears the feminist label, she has repeatedly distanced herself from what she calls “academic feminism,” criticizing it for being “too jargony” and “exclusive” and claiming that she has learned much more “about feminism from watching the women traders in the market in Nsukka [...] than from reading any seminal feminist text” (2015: para. 44). In a similar vein, she ends *We Should All Be Feminists* by describing her great-grandmother as a feminist *avant la lettre*, thus rejecting the notion of feminism as an exclusively Western concept.

While Adichie’s concerns could be interpreted as a critique of institutionalized Western feminism’s global validity and failure to incorporate different realities, she has equally distanced herself from Black feminist terms that have sought to do just that. Yet Adichie’s own avowal that she is “angrier about sexism than [...] about racism” is better understood in the context of her Pan-Africanist feminism, signaling less a normative ranking of oppression than an unfaltering commitment to Nigeria and its immediate political matters (2017b: 23). Particularly her understanding of feminism as indigenous to African societies mirrors the concerns of African feminists before her. In defining African feminism, Nnaemeka stresses how “it is not to Western feminism but rather to the African environment that one must refer. African feminism is not reactive; it is proactive. It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment. Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance” (1998: 9). Nnaemeka’s position might also help to contextualize Adichie’s skepticism toward feminist theory. While cautioning against an uncritical rejection of “theory per se” and a “stance that is so staunchly antitheory that it leaves no room for any engagement with theory” (2004: 358), Nnaemeka also asserts the practical, grassroots dimension of African feminism, or what she calls nego-feminism, meaning negotiation, “no ego” feminism (2004: 357–385).

Regarding other prominent African feminists, it is striking how similar many of Adichie’s positions are to those of Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo. Aidoo, whom Adichie has repeatedly called a literary role model, has often pointed to the existence of feminist structures in African societies, prior to or outside of Western influence. Asked about the prominent role of outspoken female protagonists in her work, Aidoo insists: “If the women in my stories are articulate, it is because that is the only type of women I grew up among. And I learnt those first feminist lessons in Africa from African women” (Frías 2003: 27). Likewise, when Adichie distances herself from the term womanism, perhaps as a theoretical

stand in for African American feminist theories, we can hear an echo of Aidoo distancing herself from the term in conversation with Alice Walker. And, the commonplaceness of the statement notwithstanding, even the title of Adichie's TED Talk seems to reiterate Aidoo's definition of feminism: "When people ask me bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development" (1998: 39). The latter half of this quote is an important qualification that further aligns the two author's political positionalities.

Having been intellectually raised during the vibrant era of African independences, Aidoo is very much a product of her time and an outspoken Pan-Africanist. In contrast to preceding intellectual movements such as Négritude, Aidoo eschews a "romanticisation of Africa's past as some exotic golden age," as Victor Odamtten notes in *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo* (1994: 10). Instead, Aidoo dedicates herself to the concrete political advancement of her home country and continent – to the point of becoming Ghana's Minister of Education in 1982. Adichie too, has referred to herself as politically Pan-African, stating that, "for me, that means I care about what's happening in Kenya, I care about the people in Bahia, Brazil [...] I'm interested in Afro-Colombia [...] because there's a familiarity there to something I feel connected to" (2017a 00:38:27).

Aidoo's Pan-African politics are inseparable from her commitment to feminism, and Adichie's purportedly global feminism is also affected by Pan-African sensibilities. Yet it is in their fictional works that these concerns are most organically interwoven and the analogies between Adichie and Aidoo are particularly striking. Since the late 1960s, Aidoo has become one of the most renowned female African writers, with plays such as *Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and *Anowa* (1970) or short story collections such as *No Sweetness Here* (1995) or *Diplomatic Pounds* (2012); narratives that, similar to Adichie's work, focus almost exclusively on the lives of young African women. Her most read work to this date, however, remains *Our Sister Killjoy*, published in 1977.

The novel traces the European travels of its protagonist Sissie, who dissects the former colonial center with biting precision, reversing the gaze, as it were, through the particular optic of a "Black-eyed Squint." *Our Sister Killjoy*, written a decade before its publication, obviously denotes a different historical constellation. The waned importance of England as the colonial mother country – yielding to the increased cultural and economic allure of the US in *Americanah* – is only the most apparent marker for the passing of time. However, the structural and thematic similarities between *Americanah* and *Our Sister Killjoy* are ample. There is the notion of the inverted colonial travel narrative, as well as the rejec-

tion or reversal of racialization, where, as Cheryl Sterling notes, “Sissie’s response realigns the specular burden, for now Africa looks back and finds that the Western world too is lacking” (2010: 136). Yet the two novels are equally critical of homespun ills, such as political mismanagement, corruption, or the effects of the African brain drain to the West. Where the term ‘*Americanah*’ mocks the haughtiness of a particular type of Nigerian returnee, *Our Sister Killjoy* exposes the phoniness of the “been-tos,” who speak of the “wonders of being overseas, pretending their tongues craved for tasteless foods” (Aidoo 1977: 90).

Both novels also exhibit the kind of generic experimentation that has left critics unsure about the mimetic relation between its literary form, the novel’s diegesis, and the authors’ politics. Where *Americanah* clearly distinguishes blog posts from the main narrative, in *Our Sister Killjoy* the already fairly lyrical, third-person chronological account of Sissie’s travels is interspersed with a highly poetic choric commentary. While Odamtten suggests that the text’s heavily ironic inflections hinder the kind of reading that would allow for a conflation of author and text, Sterling interprets the multilayered narrative structure of *Our Sister Killjoy* as a self-conscious performance of political discourse, pitting itself “against constructions of subjectivity, primacy and power” (Sterling 2010: 134). Yet similar to the way that *Americanah*’s blog posts allow for an ambiguous reading of performed authorship, Sterling concedes that “we are left to wonder if the voice is an externalization of Sissie’s interiority, a psychic venting of the colour-coded frustration generated in her journey or a device Aidoo improvises from the oral tradition [...] or even if Aidoo is blatantly embedding her own political position into the text” (Sterling 2010: 134).

Where the commentary of the chorus often puts Sissie’s confident and sarcastic, and at times essentializing and condemning, voice into question, *Americanah* creates a similar effect by having the prose action displace the authority of the blog posts. In her reading of Aidoo’s novel, Goyal explores the split between the two textual voices as an ambiguous and tense attitude toward Africa and its diaspora (*Romance* 2010: 188–92). While one denotes a historically linear trajectory that places (Pan-African) hope in the nation state and views diaspora as loss, the other expresses a more expansive and more pessimist view on the global effects of racism and colonialism and frames migration as transhistorical inevitability. In *Americanah* too, we find conflicting yet distinct attitudes toward the African Diaspora, the most obvious one represented by the novel’s romantic arc. As I have argued, it is Ifemelu’s return home and ability to see and write truthfully, past race and “like poetry” that functions as the novel’s final *dénouement*. Not only Ifemelu’s new blog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, but also the narrative itself reads like a complicated but dedicated love letter to Africa. This is

another aspect the novel shares with *Our Sister Killjoy*, the fourth and final section of which is titled “A Love Letter.”

Here, the narrative voice changes from the previous, poetically punctuated travelogue to an epistolary farewell written by a finally returning Sissie and addressed to her African lover in Europe. While abounding with romantic terms of endearment, most of the letter’s content revolves around various disagreements, in particular the scene of their first meeting, where Sissie engages in a lengthy argument with a group of expatriate Africans at a student union. Sissie chides them for their self-exile and urges that “instead of forever gathering together and victoriously spouting such beautiful radical analyses of the situation of home, we should simply hurry back” (121). While, as Goyal notes, at this point Sissie clearly holds a “cultural nationalist view of diaspora as betrayal” (2010: 199), we are also presented with her interlocutors’ contrary positions, including that of her lover, as well as Sissie’s own doubts and reservations.

This multiplicity of voices does not quite perform the same destabilizing role of the choir in the book’s other parts, where the authority of Sissie’s position is undercut by a broader view of history. When her lover attests her an “anti-western-neurosis” (119) or accuses her of being melancholically locked in time (113), these arguments are oftentimes echoed and countered by Sissie’s self-reflective stream of consciousness. Sissie appears aware of the potential presumption of her “righteous anger” (121) and, when imagining a pre-colonial idyll where she and her lover could have met, she stops herself short of becoming lost in “nostalgia and sentimental nonsense” (115). The final iteration of Sissie’s knowledge quest is thus characterized by the kind of commitment to Africa that requires her physical return. Interpreting *Our Sister Killjoy*’s ending as an unequivocal Pan-African celebration of return, Sterling notes that, “since her true love is Africa, Sissie is intertwined in its history and its destiny” (2010: 148).

However, Sissie’s candid reflections on the conflicts shaping her romantic relationship represent a conflicted relation to Africa and the diaspora. Her love letter is framed by two short sections that further suggest that the actual addressee and subject matter of Sissie’s love letter is Africa and that this message is also important for its diaspora. The opening passage reads like an anecdote, a common joke even in its vagueness, describing the encounter of a visiting African professor and a young African American student, eager to hear of Africa’s, notably Egypt’s, past glories in an attempt to refute what he must see as the root cause of racism: The Western denigration or conscious erasure of Africa’s role in world history. Yet in his earnest desire to set records straight, he threatens to reduce Africa to a mere symbol once again, if not of lack then of monolithic essence. Hence, the professor’s answer:

My dear young man [...], to give you the decent answer your anxiety demands, I would have to tell you the detailed history of the African continent. And to do that, I would have to speak every day, twenty-four hours a day, for at least three thousand years. And I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but who has that kind of time? (111)

As a prologue to Sissie’s love letter, this exchange reads like a refusal to offer finite and limited positions in a nevertheless encompassing Pan-African stance, while setting the tone for a difficult intradiasporic conversation. The very last passage of the novel reverts to the previous third-person narrative and describes how Sissie, her plane approaching the continent of Africa, decides never to post the letter:

There was no need to mail it. It was not necessary. [...] Besides, she was back in Africa. And that felt like fresh honey on the tongue: a mixture of complete sweetness and smoky roughage. Below was home with its unavoidable warmth and even after these thousands of years, its uncertainties. ‘Oh, Africa. Crazy old continent [...].’ (133)

Like Adichie, Aidoo is wary of perpetuating romantic notions of Africa. As Goyal notes, Sissie is “careful to articulate both her resistance to the West and her commitment to Africa without invoking a pre-colonial idyll” (2010: 202). At the same time, Sissie’s bird’s eye view of Africa, “huge [...], certainly warm and green” (OSK 133), evokes the mythic image of a pastoral, fertile African soil, the place where Ifemelu in *Americanah* longs to “sink her roots.” Similarly, the strong sensory imagery in *Our Sister Killjoy*’s final paragraphs could easily collapse into the kind of romantic idealization that links Africa to physicality and affect and harks back to Négritude thinker Senghor’s notion of the reciprocal relation between African soil and culture, resulting in the “physio-psychology of the Negro” that renders him [sic] “the man of Nature [...], sensual, a being with open senses” (1956: 52). Yet Aidoo counters such readings, which emphasize an eternal and essential “primacy of intuitive knowledge,” with Sissie’s understanding of the very unknowability of a vast continent in motion, the sheer potentiality of which surpasses, and perhaps even overwhelms, any attempt at sensual or intellectual mastery (ibid.).

The ending of *Our Sister Killjoy*, culminating in a romantic return that forecloses a romantic union with a lover, is notably similar to *Americanah*’s final part in Lagos. Equally similar are the protagonists’ representations of Africa as a virtually unpredictable, vibrant space of possibilities that defies various historical scripts, not only the Eurocentric model of Africa’s eternal backwardness, or the Afrocentric fixation with some form of pre-modern innocence, but also the pessimist gloom of the immediate post-independence era that equally locks the continent in a deterministic limbo. At the same time, Adichie and Aidoo

are not in the business of rebranding Africa simply to up its market value, as their political love letters to Africa are engaged in complicating the continent while committing to its futures, not its predetermined destiny.

To this end, it is worthwhile to reconsider Ifemelu's description of Lagos: "Here, she felt, anything could happen, a ripe tomato could burst out of solid stone. And so she had the dizzying sensation of falling, falling into the new person she had become, falling into the strange familiar." On the one hand, the passage stresses the abovementioned dynamism and unpredictability of contemporary Nigeria in a defamiliarizing imagery that converges both stability and insecurity, newness and oldness. At the same time, the passage echoes another text by Aidoo, namely her 1970 play *Anowa*. The play centers on the eponymous heroine and her husband Kofi Ako and is set on the Gold Coast circa 1870, a period characterized by the effects of the Bond Treaty of 1844 that granted Britain exclusive trading rights in the area today known as Ghana and that fatally allied Fante slavers and British colonialists in the transatlantic slave trade. Anowa, who has married Kofi against her parents' will and was hence expelled from her family and community, becomes increasingly estranged from and dissatisfied with her husband and his role in the trade. She empathizes with the enslaved people he deals with, euphemistically referred to as "wayfarers." Using the term for herself, she asks Kofi: "What is the difference between any of your men and me? Except that they are men and I'm a woman? None of us belongs" (*Anowa*: 97).

As in her previous play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Aidoo explores Ghana's role in the slave trade as a haunting and uncomfortable feature of diasporic estrangement. In *Anowa's* most notable scene, the childless Anowa recounts having dreamed of being "a big big woman," out of whom "poured men, women and children" (106). In her dream, she embodies "Mama Africa" losing her children to the "boiling hot" sea and its pink-faced lobster people, who seize and violently destroy them. Finally, she concludes: "Any time there is mention of a slave, I see a woman who is me and a bursting of a ripe tomato or a swollen pod" (107).

Coincidentally or not, the unusual imagery of the bursting tomato links both authors' aspirations to depict Africa in its defamiliarizing complexity, and to engage in a Pan-African or diasporic conversation that holds up to its conflicting contemporary and historical trajectories. To this effect, Aidoo's intentional usage and subtle reworking of the figure of the African mother is a pronounced feature of her writing, not only in *Anowa* but also in *Our Sister Killjoy*, where Sissie mocks the African self-exiles' sentimental mobilizing of "the mother thing" in order to justify their foreign stay (122).

No metaphor for Africa is more overused than that of the African mother, simultaneously standing in for the proverbial motherland and the genealogy of its

people. *Our Sister Killjoy*’s protagonist Sissie equally makes use of this image when she angrily rebukes: “Of course she has suffered, the African mother [...]. Just look at what’s happening to her children over the last couple of hundred years.” She then recounts the ill fate of Africa’s children on both sides of the Atlantic (123). In her discussion of the novel, Goyal comments on this passage as follows: “Sissie extends the particular, local situation to a broader, diasporic one, seeing black history as a global one. Invoking the global history of the diaspora, she recalls the pain of slavery, rape, poverty, service in colonial armies, and cultural alienation” (2010: 201). It is quite significant, Goyal notes, that Sissie ends her litany of historical atrocities with the image of the “been-to” grandchild, who is so alienated from Africa that it cannot even speak its (grand)mother tongue. This decidedly critical view of migration is not absent from *Americanah*, despite the novel’s generally more migratory and cosmopolitan sensibilities.

While Ifemelu is, of course, herself an *Americanah*, a modern day ‘been-to,’ there is one character who firmly embodies both the critical stance and the maternal stereotype: Obinze’s mother, a university professor and single parent. Ifemelu is not only impressed with her knowledge and independence but indeed with her African femininity. Upon their first meeting, her image and that of a popular Nigerian singer conflate in Ifemelu’s imagination, causing Ifemelu to swoon at her “full-nosed, full-lipped beauty, her round face framed by a low Afro, her faultless complexion the deep brown of cocoa” (68). As a child, Ifemelu had already “guiltily fantasize[d]” about her father being married to the beautiful singer instead of her mother (69). Now, Obinze’s mother becomes an equally idealized maternal figure, the kind of African mother who is deeply connected to her cultural heritage, who cooks *garri* and soup asks Ifemelu to translate her Igbo name, but who is also strongly committed to the future of her country, particularly the future of its girls. It is Obinze’s mother who, similar to Aidoo’s Sissie, repeatedly mourns the brain drain to the West and issues a particular warning to Ifemelu about not jeopardizing her education through an unwanted pregnancy.

Both critical and loyal toward the nation state, Obinze’s mother also displays a Pan-African or diasporic commitment. When an old Jamaican woman in London calls Obinze “brother,” he wants to call his mother and tell her about it (255). Similarly, in the US, when Ifemelu experiences conflicting processes of ‘becoming Black,’ she remembers watching *Roots* at Obinze’s house, and also how “she had felt lacking, watching Obinze’s mother, and wishing that she, too, could cry” (137). Almost to the point of cliché, Obinze’s mother embodies Mother Africa weeping for the loss of her children, now and then. Yet it is her matured sense of solidarity in a global Black imaginary that also inspires Ifemelu’s own process of maturity.

## 7 “This Shared Space of Africanness”: The Hair Salon as Afropolitan Heterotopia

*Americanah* is a diasporic novel that explicitly negotiates different Black epistemologies. While acceding to the constitutive force of an afterlife of slavery, the novel also investigates other moments of race in/as history, and it proffers other forms of Blackness: communal, diverse, Pan-African. At times, we can detect a strained but nevertheless existent notion of a feminist Pan-African solidarity, in the continental sense of the term, as well as the glimpses of a global frame for Blackness that is contingent upon the contradictory multiplicity of the diaspora. To this effect, it is worth revisiting the first chapter. Opening with the line, “Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing,” Ifemelu travels, imaginatively, to various other places on the East Coast, comparing their various odors to the unmarkedness of Princeton. She is making her way to Trenton to braid her hair because it “was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton” (3). Ifemelu is traveling from a culturally white space, with all the privileges it entails, into a Black, feminized space, with all the difficulties it entails.

The journey recounted is reminiscent of Cherríe Moraga’s Preface to *This Bridge Called My Back – Writings of Radical Women of Power*, a profoundly influential anthology on so-called Third World Feminism that inaugurated a crucial and ongoing paradigm shift in Anglo-American feminist theory. While Adichie has repeatedly stated that she has never read feminist theory, she might have read this text. As Ifemelu transitions from a platform where everyone is “white and lean, in short, flimsy clothes,” to a platform where most are “black people, many of them fat, in short flimsy clothes,” the reader is introduced to the “*irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking*” voice of her blog, a metonymic stand in for Ifemelu’s coming to race consciousness in the US (4–5). Similarly, Moraga describes the journey from “the white suburbs of Watertown, Massachusetts,” to “Black Roxbury” as her own coming-to-terms with privilege, with female and feminist desire (1981: xiii). Encapsulated in these complex realizations is the demand for a “movement that helps me make some sense of the trip from Waterford to Roxbury, from white to Black. I love women the entire way, beyond a doubt” (Moraga 1981: xiv). Anticipated, at the end of Moraga’s journey are the contours of a hard-won, consciously established kind of sisterhood or feminist solidarity.

Ifemelu’s own feminist journey does not end with her arrival in the Trenton hair salon. While her social mobility has allowed her to transcend the barriers of racialized urban space, once she finds herself among this involuntary community of predominantly Black women, Ifemelu faces other, less tangible boundaries of class, ethnicity, and nationality. During the course of her stay, Ifemelu man-

ages to move from class condescendence to emphatic, ethical solidarity without collapsing these borders through what Chandra Mohanty criticizes as “vague assumptions of sisterhood or images of complete identification with the other” (2004: 3).

Instead, the hair salon solidarity is forged despite and through vast differences, highlighting how the “most expansive and inclusive visions of feminism need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them” (Mohanty 2004: 2). In this, the salon becomes something of a test card for a particular Afro-feminist utopia, or, in the sense of Michel Foucault’s heterotopia, an “effectively enacted utopia” (Foucault 1986: 24). It is the kind of real and concrete space that is curiously linked to all sorts of other spaces and times while retaining a somewhat mythical timelessness and placelessness. This deceptively generic African hair salon in Trenton, New Jersey, miraculously bundles the multiple locations and temporalities of the Black Diaspora – including the current contradictions and contestations that mark the moment of Afropolitanism.

The multilocality of the salon in *Americanah* is self-evidenced by the way it links the various routes and roots of the people inhabiting it. It also transpires through the fact that – in countless cosmopolitan cities around the world – there are spaces just like it, mapping the coordinates of the diaspora as what it truly is: “the shape of the globe” (Wright 2013: 15). It also, crucially, reveals the historicity of transnational Black culture, linking what is thought of as “traditionally African” styles with modern fashions, and rendering Afropolitanism a constellation through which both the effects of 1960s ‘Black is Beautiful’ movements and contemporary African migration become visible. While these salons aren’t new phenomena, they do bear a heightened significance in their relation to the contemporary ‘Natural Hair movement,’ as an expression of transnational Black culture. As Julie Iromuanya writes:

Because the movement and its associated industry have been disseminated globally in fashion magazines, television, film, and other forms of commercial media, the Natural Hair movement is as much a political orientation and industry as it is a representation of the preeminence of global black popular culture.” (2017: 168)<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> In her discussion of the hair braiding salon in *Americanah*, Iromuanya notes that the contemporary “Natural Hair movement, and the dot-com-era celebration of Africentric aesthetics” (2017: 167), rely heavily on the tropes of self-reliance and autonomy and therefore threaten the livelihood of these kinds of salons. However, she also concedes that the hair salon in *Americanah* successfully bridges the movement’s by and large middle-class lifeworld with that of the working-class African immigrant.

As a subplot framing the novel's primary narrative, the hair braiding salon takes on a distinct metadiegetic significance. Whilst Ifemelu's and Obinze's life stories unfold over decades and continents, the chronotope of the salon remains more or less unchanged, a spatiotemporal constant. The salon is described as a fairly dilapidated, crowded little shop, confirming nearly all of Ifemelu's preconceptions:

[I]t would look, she was sure, like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in a part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding, they had radiators that were too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer, and they were full of Francophone West African women braiders, one of whom would be the owner and speak the best English and be deferred to by the others. (9)

In fact, the salon is so badly ventilated – the air sticky and thick and “seething with heat” (103) – that time itself appears to congeal and move more slowly and Ifemelu's six-hour stay frays into a delirious, dreamlike haze. While Ifemelu's mind wanders in and out of her memories, the literal weaving of strands converges with the weaving of narrative strands, signified in the distinctly gendered metaphor of hair. Launching the temporal porosity of the salon chronotope, hair is the Proustian madeleine that triggers Ifemelu's memory of her mother's hair and her Nigerian childhood. Where, before, Ifemelu had been vaguely pondering her future in Nigeria, anxiously interpreting any positive projection of Nigeria as “an augury of her return home” (13), her braider Aisha's comment on her supposedly hard, unrelaxed hair strikes a delicate nerve and fully transports Ifemelu back to Lagos, where she “had grown up in the shadow of her mother's hair[...], black-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon” (41).

Merging different “slices in time” (Foucault 1986: 26), the hair salon is open to the kind of narrative heterochrony that links the future, past, and present of Ifemelu's life in particular, and the African or Black Diaspora in general. As a heterotopic space fusing the private and the public, the hair salon is also fully permeated by the “hidden presence of the sacred” (Foucault 1986: 23). Here, Ifemelu remembers how her mother, caught up in fundamentalist religious fervor, had one day cut her bounteous hair off and burned it “where she burned her used sanitary pads” (41). When Ifemelu later describes how she and other Black women involved with the online natural hair movement talk about hair in quasi-religious terms, admitting that she “had never talked about God so

much,” the link between femininity, religion, Blackness, and hair is further established (213).<sup>74</sup>

Hair is the common denominator bringing together women from all rungs of society in a way that confronts Ifemelu with the oftentimes stifling yet cozy expectations of “shared Africanness” and her own admission of the “perverse pleasure” gained from classist self-exaltation (103). The hair salon also stages the somewhat stereotypical tensions between African American and African women, as well as the prejudices prevailing amongst different African nationalities and ethnicities, and the power imbalance behind the one white middle class customer’s “aggressively friendly” confidence and the shop owner’s submissive, immigrant eagerness (189). The same character lectures Ifemelu on the quaintness of *Things Fall Apart* and the aptness of Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* in showing “how modern Africa works” (ibid.). Ifemelu is particularly irritated by her purported belief “that she was miraculously neutral in how she read books, while others read emotionally,” drawing up well-established battle lines between ‘Africa’ and the ‘West.’ In many ways, the hair braiding salon contains a space of conflict and contradictions, where the contours of each individual strand remain visible despite and through the ostensive harmony of the braid.

The salon is also the space that allows us to glimpse diasporic pasts, presents, and futures and where, magically, a moment of true solidarity seems possible. Immediately after Ifemelu leaves the salon, she learns about Dike’s attempted suicide. While this may appear as the novel’s most tragic incident, I would argue that the preceding scene is much more emotionally rendered, and perhaps infinitely more tragic. In the beginning, Aisha hadn’t been more much more to Ifemelu than blog fodder for an imagined post on “How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy” (18). Aisha is rendered strange, irrevocably different and a little repulsive even with her flaming skin condition. While Ifemelu does not want to be “dragged further into Aisha’s morass,” toward the end of the braiding session she is moved to feel with and acknowledge Aisha’s plight (354).

On an intellectual level, Ifemelu already understands the very concrete differences between them, including the fact that she owns a green card and financial independence whereas Aisha does not. But her overall “irritation

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74 From an equally gendered and racialized, albeit male, perspective, the African American barbershop has drawn extensive scholarly attention and is often theorized as a pronouncedly political, public space. Likewise, the religious or spiritual connotations of its particular privileging of orality and testimony must not be overlooked. See Mills 2013 or Harris-Lacewell 2004. For an extensive cultural discussion of Black hair, see Byrd and Tharps 2001.

dissolve[s]” into “a gossamered sense of kinship,” and she emotionally connects with Aisha’s fear of never seeing her sick mother again (363). Ifemelu promises to help by speaking to the Igbo boyfriend with green card papers who refuses to marry Aisha. For a moment, we are led to believe that Ifemelu will wield her personal influence in favor of a stranger. Then, however, Aunt Uju calls with the bad news about Dike, and Aisha is permanently forgotten. This fragile moment – marked by one woman’s silent collapse “into despair” and another’s inability to “get up and leave” – limns the shape of a Pan-African feminist solidarity that is yet to come (364). It remains limited to the minor cosmopolitan or Afropolitan space of the hair salon, similar to Farouq’s internet café in *Open City*. The novel’s rendering of the hair salon as a somewhat surreal, effectively utopian space works toward experiencing this stunted plotline as neither particularly jarring, or dissatisfying, nor morally reprehensible on Ifemelu’s part. Depending on the angle, Ifemelu has either woken from a utopian dream or awoken into the nightmare of a racist reality.

The communality circumscribed in the utopian diasporic space of the hair salon also serves as a buffer to Ifemelu’s individualized success story, which could easily lend itself to the post-racial and post-feminist claims of the neoliberal subject. Already, these claims are frequently projected onto the lives of the Afropolitan, metropolitan, or “Nigerpolitan” – as *Americanah* dubs them – elites of post-Independence African nations. Despite the arguably fantastic element to Ifemelu’s economic success, *Americanah* does offer a nuanced investigation of gendered labor and the heightened, systemic vulnerability of certain bodies, particularly female and particularly Black or of color. At the same time, this vulnerability can become a condition for feminist solidarity. As a testing ground for the limits of empathy, the hair braiding salon has already provided Ifemelu with the bitter realization that some subject positions are rarely challenged in their assumptions of objective normativity, a character trait that is particularly noteworthy because Obinze had once ascribed it to Ifemelu herself. Given her propensity for “thinki[ng] everyone is like [her],” Ifemelu’s experience in racially stratified and relentlessly racializing American society is all the more insulting to her sense of selfhood (92). In her review of the novel, Ruth Franklin notes the novel’s foregrounding of Ifemelu’s potential to be “a privileged white woman who does not notice another’s agony” (2013: 42). Yet through the novel’s privileging of race and the analogy of racialization and Americanization, Ifemelu is never quite allowed that kind of ethical lapse. Without neglecting class, this view complicates the assumption made in the very first chapter, where she meets a white dreadlocked man who tells her that “black people need to get over themselves, it’s all about class now” (4). Put blandly, this view reiterates the permeability of class boundaries and the fixity of race, but it also advances this kind of truism

by highlighting the mutual imbrications of race and class, their global dimension and local specificity.

While it might be difficult to argue for the fact that this subtle sense of solidarity also mirrors a concretely realized sense of unity and collectivity in the present, the novel's diasporic desire clearly anticipates this. Its generic status as both romance with and love letter to Africa speaks to its Pan-African or diasporic sensibilities, but in a way that is unmistakably gendered and anchors itself more in the present or future rather than the Black Diaspora's painful pasts. Recalling Jameson's contentious notion of the third world novel's natural inclination toward national allegory, *Americanah* projects "a political dimension" by being not only "seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic," but empathically so (Jameson 1986: 69). Not only is the private political, but clearly a love story is not apolitical if the object of the love object is both a political unit and the projected antidote. In this sense, the hair braiding salon conveys Adichie's, and by extension Afropolitanism's, commitment to representing the ordinary, the day-to-day, the particular normalcy of the present moment. It revisits not the exceptional historical moments of Pan-Africanism, but the quotidian encounters of humans on different historical trajectories, whose paths routinely converge and ought to affect our understanding of diaspora and Blackness.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that the stark contrast between the novel's depiction of race realism and its happy-go-lucky love story is balanced by its posing as quest romance – in which American racialization is presented as the one obstacle, the dragon Ifemelu needs to slay – and, at the same time, appears somewhat unreal, even fanciful. Positing the fallacy of race, Ifemelu's escape from a dangerously regressive America to a race-less, futuristic Nigeria reflects the kind of Pan-African wish fulfilment that nevertheless draws attention to the very real nightmare of racialization. An only slightly different reading, however, would draw entirely different conclusions from this kind of estrangement, wielding the fictitiousness of race as proof of post-racialism or a refutation of Blackness. Moreover, the view that race and 'politically correct' race talk are archaic residues of the past that need to be surpassed easily obscures the fundamental role racism plays in capital accumulation. In this sense, the novel's ambiguity could actually be read as a compromise, in keeping with what Moretti considers the "deepest vocation" of not only 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, but literature as a whole: "forging *compromises between different ideological systems*" (2007: 93).

Indeed, *Americanah* is as much an indictment of racism as it is a diasporic auto-critique. Be it Obinze's faded infatuation with Black American culture or Ifemelu's ill-fated romance with Obama, *Americanah*'s gradual "[f]alling out of

love” with America suggests not only a reckoning with the pathology of racism but also with the epistemic hegemony of the Middle Passage (434). Where earlier diasporic texts, most notably Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, were able to extract a soothing balm of cultural identity from the pressures of slavery and the Middle Passage, *Americanah* exposes this particular Euro-Atlantic notion of tradition as a very limited model for a global Black identity. Understanding the narrative wish fulfillment of her novel as romantic, basically utopian fantasy also allows us to interpret the somewhat naïve, and perhaps even problematic notion of ending or transcending race as Adichie’s insistence that slavery is not the only coordinate en route to becoming Black. In *Americanah*, the most tangible legacy of slavery emerges as a system of labor, one that marks certain bodies as viable for expropriation rather than exploitation, but a system of labor nevertheless, not an epistemology, not an axiom.

While the novel indeed navigates the rifts and misunderstandings between old and new diasporas, I wouldn’t go so far as to see “black Americans merely lurk in the background like expectant ghosts or persons displaced from a narrative of race they used to own,” as Chude-Sokei suggests in his reading of *Americanah* and other new diasporic novels (2014: 68). Instead, the novel again performs a twofold labor: On the one hand, it highlights the differences between these two groups, or at least showcases the distinctness of the African or Nigerian immigrant experience. At the same time, it also offers the kind of Pan-African historical awareness that may generate bonds beyond the limited national framework of an American Blackness. This historical awareness can also serve as a bulwark against external divisions. At one point, for example, Ifemelu counters the “simplistic comparison” behind the proposition that Africans are the better American Blacks because they don’t have all these “issues” with the simple historical fact that “[m]aybe when the African American’s father was not allowed to vote because he was black, the Ugandan’s father was running for parliament or studying at Oxford” (168). Acknowledging the difficult feat of satirizing race or provincializing the Middle Passage without trivializing their effects, the novel’s diasporic desire engenders a notion of Pan-African solidarity built to contain the Black Diaspora’s contradictions. While Adichie has recently admitted to not yet having the language to write about the deadly way racism renders people subhuman in the US, she has also stressed how Black culture began in Africa, not on the slave ship (Adichie 2017a: 00:37:50).<sup>75</sup> *Americanah*’s romantic return and Pan-African utopia implies that there is much to gain from an at least meta-

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75 Cf. Gilroy’s assertion that “[c]ulture doesn’t just sort of go on hold when you get on a slave ship and then resume when you get to the other side” (Shelby 2008: 121).

phorical return to Africa that does not repeatedly stage the pain of separation nor freeze in a mythical limbo but allows its contemporary voices to intervene into a hegemonic race discourse.